

THE Strange Adventure OF A Broke MERCENARY

WRITTEN BY Mine

ILLUSTRATED BY peroshi



NOVEL

3



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**“I’ve finally
pinned down
the location
of one of my
parts!”**

**“And that’s got
something to
do with our
next job?”**

Lapis’s face lit up as she spread out a sheet of paper that she had presumably torn off the guild’s bulletin board.



Anje

A magician and one of Claes's party members. She has joined the proctors in order to rein in Claes's womanizing ways. Just as she feared, upon arrival, he is immediately surrounded by girls. She's already tired of him.

Claes

Young and distinguished, his home country values his great potential for future heroism. He is the leader of a party of adventurers, but he's a bit of a skirt-chaser. This time, he's returned to his alma mater to help proctor the final exam.

Scena

A young girl whom Loren and Lapis saved in the forest, though after that, a ritual turned her into a Lifeless King, and she went on a wild rampage. She was defeated by Loren, but she evaded destruction by possessing him.

Loren

A former mercenary who became an adventurer after his mercenary company fell to ruin. He boasts enough physical strength to easily swing around a sword as tall as he is. While he generally looks rough around the edges, he has a surprisingly wide breadth of knowledge. Scena, a Lifeless King, has taken up residence in his soul.

Lapis

A priest who served as the healer of the first party Loren ever worked with. Owing to a certain secret of hers, she decided to stick around with Loren after that.



**“You were being
chased too?!”**

**“What do we
have here?
Didn’t think
I’d run into
you! What a
coincidence!”**

**“Not a welcome
one.”**

Evidently, Claes was in the midst of fleeing a problem identical to theirs. He’d emerged into a wider corridor only for his own slime flood to merge with theirs, and now they were all frantically racing in the same direction.

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Seven Seas Entertainment

KUITSUME YOHEI NO GENSO KITAN Volume 3

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Illustrations by peroshi

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Prologue:

Listening to Tales of Ruin

THE RUMOR WAS SPREADING—a whole city, wiped out.

<*Do you think he means Hansa?*> asked the small girl with transparent wings who fluttered in the corner of Loren's peripheral vision.

Loren stole a glance at her from the guild bar as he took a swig from his mug of cheap ale.

It wasn't at all rare for a settlement or village to be destroyed; in fact, people only really thought such events worth mentioning when the loss was on the level of a city or greater.

Unlike villages, which were forever being built and torn down, cities only came to be because they survived long enough to develop into, well, cities. Most of the smaller settlements these days didn't even have names. However, if a named city fell to ruin, it meant considerable injury had befallen both property and people.

Loren's business wasn't completely unrelated to Hansa's—in fact, he'd been in the middle of completing a quest in that very city when it had been destroyed due to misdeeds he personally witnessed. That said, he hadn't offered an official report on the matter, nor had anyone else he knew.

Hansa's neighboring nations were presently conducting their own investigations, and thus far, they'd established that every single village that had belonged in some way to the city-state of Hansa had been completely and utterly decimated.

Sure, Hansa hadn't been the largest place, but the fall of a nation was the fall of a nation, and quite a few people were vying to fill the power vacuum it had left behind.

Every neighboring country saw Hansa's demise as a chance to expand its own territory, and Hansa had shared a border with a number of places; people were

eagerly betting on who would be first to stake their claim on its ruins.

Of course, one wrong move and any one of these interested parties might be labeled an uncouth aggressor. Furthermore, not a one of them had yet moved into this territory—a territory whose every last resident had mysteriously disappeared.

In any case, all these investigations, checks, and claims on this empty land would no doubt eventually lead to bloodshed. More importantly, Loren considered this none of his concern.

<Ale tastes awfully strange. I've never actually had it before.>

The girl in Loren's peripheral vision, who was now curiously peeking into his cup, was the daughter of the chancellor of Hansa. Loren had recently been tasked with delivering her to that now-fallen city. Her name was Scena. After being turned into a *Lifeless King*—the most powerful variety of undead—by the same mysterious individual who had instigated the end of Hansa, Scena had met her defeat at Loren's hands.

That said, while Loren was a seasoned mercenary, he should have had no way of defeating a *Lifeless King* on his own. Quite a few things had worked in his favor leading up to his victory.

To the point, Scena had been defeated. However, the moment her body had disintegrated, she had severed her soul from her physical form and escaped death by possessing Loren.

"You can taste it?" Loren spoke unthinking, and Scena put a finger to her lips.

No one could see her, apart from Loren. At first, he'd thought that this floating figure was a ghost. However, Scena claimed that while she registered in his eyes as visual information, her spiritual body was not actually where his mind told her she was.

At that point, he had asked her why she would bother going about it in such a convoluted way.

<Well, if I were to manifest my actual astral body, those with the right skill sets would see me too—and then the cat would be out of the bag.>

Scena's soul currently existed within Loren's, and while that made his aura a bit peculiar, his own soul functioned as a cover for hers. She was considerably more difficult to notice.

A part of Loren did resent her for having done this to him without his input, but he had to allow that he had yet to face any inconvenience because of it. He also couldn't tell Scena to leave—that would mean condemning her to a slow and painful death.

Thus, he had decided that he simply wouldn't think about it.

Although some things Scena had said were troubling; he suspected they would inevitably lead to problems. For example:

<I share your senses, to a certain degree.>

Part of Loren wanted to consult with his partner—a woman who seemed to know everything. But that partner called herself a priest, for what her claims were worth. Consequently, Loren was convinced that nothing good could come of telling her that an undead being was living in his head rent-free.

"A normal priest would exorcise her... But I get the feeling our priest would use her as a lab rat..."

Lapis saw Loren as a comrade, so he thought she wouldn't do anything that would put his life at risk. He hoped, at least. However, that still left everything short of death on the table. Loren had therefore decided to keep quiet about it—so long as it didn't cause any issues.

When all was said and done, however, having a young girl's soul in his body did feel rather unsettling. Creepy, even. He had a rather hard time putting it into words.

<I'm happy that you want to talk to me... But you should probably keep your responses to yourself. You never know who's watching.>

Loren surreptitiously scanned the area. While business at the adventurers' guild bar was as lively as ever, he saw no one paying particular attention to him.

Loren, you see, was rather ignorant to his developing reputation. Not long ago, an adventurer in this very same bar had called him a leech for mooching

off of Lapis. Loren had gone a little overboard and beaten the man half to death—while Lapis had beat up his friends. The waitresses had taken to dropping this fact here and there, and unsurprisingly, no one in the know felt especially inclined to pick a fight with him.

Of course, one look at the large sword Loren kept at his back and any adventurer of even very slight mental dexterity would have realized the strength of the man who swung such a thing around. There were, naturally, always exceptions to the rule.

“Oh? What’s this I see? Mr. Loren? Drinking so early again?”

The individual calling out to him was a girl in priest vestments with a swaying black ponytail. She was pretty enough to draw quite a few glances in town, and her eyes sparkled with interest at seemingly everything life had to offer. She approached Loren’s table with an incredibly light step, and she plopped herself into the seat across from him without so much as a by your leave.

“I can’t say I approve of having a drink in place of breakfast. Ah, excuse me, could I have what he’s having?” Lapis had barely taken her seat before she placed an order with the waitress.

This girl had been accompanying Loren for a good while now. She was a priest in service to the god of knowledge, and on top of that, Loren owed her a sizable amount of money. While she looked like an ordinary human girl, she was actually of demon-kind—the black sheep of all other civilizations, to put it lightly. She was at present traveling outside of demon territory to grow more worldly and experienced.

“Should a priest be drinking so early in the morning?”

“The god of knowledge’s scripture says absolutely nothing on the subject of alcohol consumption,” Lapis said with a straight face, thanking the waitress as she accepted her glass.

As Loren took another swig from his own mug, he thought on how Lapis could certainly have afforded to order something of better quality. He watched her as she carefully cradled her cup with two hands, cocked her head curiously, and asked, “Incidentally, Mr. Loren. How are you paying for that?”

“I paid in advance. Got a bit of hazard pay for that last quest.”

In other words, the very same quest that had culminated in the destruction of Hansa and Scena’s transformation into an undead horror. As Scena had been written off as dead and the city had been destroyed, the quest had been designated a complete failure. Even worse, Loren had been hospitalized at the end of it—not due to injuries sustained in combat but from the extreme fatigue that had followed his final fight.

Overall, the quest would have been a total loss had Loren not been paid a pittance for the zombies and revenants he had defeated along the way. The sum wasn’t nearly enough to put a hole in his debt, but he did have a bit of money now, which he had promptly begun to spend on ale.

However, the moment Loren explained this to Lapis, a look of complete and utter disbelief spread over her face. She stared fixedly at him. “Mr. Loren...you actually paid money for something?!”

“Oh, shut it. The hell do you take me for?”

“No, I mean, you’re *Mr. Loren*.”

“Don’t look so surprised. Aren’t you supposed to say something about using that money to pay you back instead?”

“I said I wouldn’t pressure you.”

To be true, that was one of the conditions under which he had taken a loan from her. However, if Lapis really never tried to collect, Loren expected that he would slowly stop feeling like he had borrowed any money from her at all. Not to mention that she wasn’t charging him interest either.

Interest was a vital part of massive debts in Loren’s experience—it indicated the loan was given in seriousness. Yet Lapis didn’t seem to care about that in the slightest.

“I’m not exactly trying to earn a profit from you,” she said, gingerly sipping from the glass she held between the palms of her hands.

Loren frowned. In that case, he couldn’t comprehend why she had blithely handed him that exorbitant sum.

“I don’t see you returning thirty gold any time soon, anyway.”

This number, which she so casually blurted out, caused a few of the nearby adventurers to spit out their drinks or choke on the food in their mouths.

I can’t even blame them, Loren thought as he spun the cup in his hands.

The total amount Loren had thus far borrowed from Lapis was extraordinary by almost any measure. Just three gold coins would have been enough to comfortably support a family of four for a year, give or take. Meaning Loren had, in short, borrowed enough money to support that family for a decade.

“I’m guessing adventuring ain’t too profitable then,” Loren said, glancing around at their peers. *Thirty gold must be a lot to them if they’re that surprised.*

For his part, he’d met a good number of generals and infamous mercenaries on the battlefield who had come equipped with enchanted weapons and armor. Each of these pieces of equipment would have cost several hundred gold apiece. In other words, those generals and mercenaries had both the money and connections to obtain such equipment. Given his exposure to these things, Loren hadn’t considered thirty gold an absurd amount.

“It’s not that adventurers aren’t raking in profits. It’s that the ones here don’t know *how* to be profitable,” Lapis said, completely nonchalant.

This sounded odd to Loren. Lapis had been right there with him when their quest fell to pieces, and she had therefore suffered the same financial loss, but she didn’t seem like someone who’d taken a blow to her coffers.

Intrigued by her confidence, he couldn’t help but ask, “Meaning you turned a profit this time around?”

“Of course I did,” Lapis replied, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Loren frowned. He had no idea where she could have possibly earned enough to brazenly boast about her winnings. “The zombie killing didn’t pay that much, did it?”

“That was a drop in the bucket.”

“Then what? Did you save enough on preparation fees to turn a profit from

that?”

“Yes, well, about that...” Lapis leaned over the table between them and lowered her voice. Loren instinctually leaned in to join her, and she hid her mouth with one hand as she whispered, “I made off with an impressive haul from a certain city, you see...”

“Oi, hold up.”

“If you want me to return anything, first tell me who I’m supposed to give it back to.”

“I mean...”

She did have a point. Seeing as the entire country had gone down in flames, even if Lapis *had* gone on a looting spree, she had no one to whom she could pay reparations.

“It wasn’t much, mind you. I was pretty occupied with carrying you. I just took a bit here and there from the shops around the hospital. Ah, and I picked up that smithing contraption you were using. No need to worry.”

“That’s not the issue! Oh, whatever.”

Having neither residents nor government, Hansa was effectively a lawless territory. Loren realized that everyone in the region any time soon would stuff their pockets with anything they could find, and in that case, it was probably better that Lapis had gotten there first.

Loren gave up on pursuing the matter any further. Even so, he had to say *something*. “I’ll ignore it this time, but keep those sticky fingers in check.”

“You make a very good point. I will exercise utmost caution.” Lapis obediently nodded, but Loren couldn’t tell how much those words meant, coming from her.

Loren glanced at Scena, whose smile was wry in the corner of his eye, and he downed the rest of his drink in one gulp.

Chapter 1:

Quest to Warning

“BY THE WAY, Mr. Loren, I just remembered something important.” Lapis suddenly leaned in—she didn’t think the conversation was over yet. Her sudden movement caused Loren to lurch back a bit, and he used the opportunity to order another drink from the nearby waitress.

The waitress seemed a touch taken aback when he placed exact change in copper coins in her hand, but she soon recovered her business smile and disappeared behind the counter to prepare his order.

Loren was astonished. *Even the waitress finds it weird that I’m paying.*

But there was no time to ruminate on the subject as Lapis reached out, grabbed Loren by the shoulder, and forcefully pulled him back into the conversation. “Are you listening to me?”

“Yeah, yeah. You forgot something?”

“As you may recall, Mr. Loren, I have a sworn duty,” she said as she settled back in her seat, clearly satisfied that she had his attention.

Loren, meanwhile, hadn’t the slightest idea what she was talking about. He tilted his head, eyes filled with doubt. “What do you mean?”

“I’m talking about my arms, legs, and eyes.”

Right. Loren recalled that, despite all appearances to the contrary, Lapis’s limbs and eyes were imitations. Her real ones were somewhere out in the world, and she was supposed to retrieve them. Did that really warrant being called something as overblown as “sworn duty”? Loren tilted his head even further.

“On top of my sworn duty to gather worldly experience in order to mature into an unimpeachably splendid individual, I have a duty to search out the stolen pieces of my body.”

“You’re still looking for ‘em?”

“For what it’s worth. Though I must admit, there are times I find myself wondering if it might not matter.”

This brazen statement made Scena do a faceplant.

If that’s all it takes to make her keel over, she’s going to have back problems one of these days—to say nothing of her knees. Although it occurred to Loren that this was unlikely to ever be a real problem for a girl who was little more than a soul.

“In any case, I’m searching for a part of myself.” Lapis clenched her fist to tie it all together.

<Err, who exactly is Lapis?> Scena asked.

For a moment, Loren considered how to explain it. While Scena was far more powerful than she appeared, in her current predicament, it was hard to imagine her somehow managing to tattle on Lapis, even if she did learn Lapis’s true nature. He decided to lay it out honestly—and this time, he spoke to Scena without uttering a sound in the physical world.



<A demon? That explains it. The instant I got like this, I could tell she wasn't human. Not that I could tell what she really was—I'd never seen anyone like her before. A demon, then...>

Loren was rather impressed that Scena had sensed that much in the first place.

Looking rather proud of herself, Scena next pointed at the sword propped up beside him. *<And that's not a normal sword either. I'll need to study it more to sort it out, but it broke through a Lifeless King's defensive magic, and it seems to restore your stamina a bit, though rather gradually.>*

If that's true... Loren glanced at the sword. Sure enough, when he'd fought Scena, his sword had managed to strike her body without issue, and sure enough, *Lifeless Kings* were generally protected by strong barriers both physical and magical.

Loren already had a vague idea of where the sword had come from—the curious and emphatic demon across the table. If she had been the one who procured it, there was no telling what other abilities it might possess.

His thoughts were interrupted as his cheeks were sandwiched between soft palms and his gaze was forcefully turned back toward Lapis.

“Mr. Loren? Are you listening?”

“Sorry, my mind wandered along the way.” Loren didn't want to risk stirring up trouble with a lie and so opted for honesty; that was usually his best bet.

While Lapis seemed awfully displeased, she released him, pressed her hands against the table, and strengthened her tone as she brought herself closer to his face. “Okay, are you listening *now*? I've finally pinned down the location of one of my parts!”

“And that's got something to do with our next job?”

“Precisely!” Lapis's face lit up as she spread out a sheet of paper that she had presumably torn off the guild's bulletin board.

Adjusting his posture, Loren scanned through the quest posting that had been slapped down before him. Once he finished, he stared long and hard at Lapis's

face.

“Oh, don’t look at me like that. You’ll make me blush.”

“Not my problem. Is this seriously an adventurer-worthy quest?”

The doubt in Loren’s eyes was entirely justified. Nevertheless, Lapis nodded with a smile, as if to say this was completely normal. As such, Loren looked at the details of the quest again.

It read:

From: Wolfe Adventurer Training Academy

This year’s graduate training will be held in our school’s underground labyrinth. We will pay thirty silver per head. The quest entails proctoring our graduates on their journey through the dungeon as well as guarding them in case of emergency.

“Since when did adventurers get an education?”

At a glance around the bar, not a single adventurer in sight seemed particularly educated. They were the sorts who drank while the sun was up and spent their days grumbling about that and everything else—not that Loren was any better, in that regard. For that matter, Loren had been able to call himself an adventurer without having received a single day’s worth of training.

Lapis answered slowly, choosing her words carefully. “It’s an adventurers’ school in name only. As I recall, its true purpose is to gather individuals of talent—nobles and commoners alike—in order to mold them into champions and leaders of men.”

“Like Claes?” Loren asked as he recalled the face of the red-haired young man who’d fought alongside them in the city-state of Hansa.

Claes had a gift, a certain grace only present in those with innate talent. While this was still largely only rumored, it was said that adventurers like him often had the backing of some nation or another. Claes did fit the image of someone who had trained in an establishment like the one Lapis described.

“Right, I do think Mr. Claes came from a similar institution.”

“In that case, I’m not feeling up to it.”

In short, if it was a facility that nurtured talents like Claes, it would be chock full of people like Claes. Loren didn't really mind being condescended to—to a point. That didn't mean he would willingly skip into a place where hordes of the sort of person who naturally looked down on others would flock.

"And anyway, what's a graduation exam got to do with what you're looking for?" he asked.

"The thing with Wolfe Academy is that a vast labyrinth stretches beneath its campus."

According to Lapis, underground labyrinths were actually surprisingly common all around the world. It wasn't particularly rare for a city, and consequently an adventurers' academy, to be built on top of one. People were often drawn to exploring labyrinths for the artifacts and resources hidden within them. People who managed to claim such prizes would prosper, and their good fortune would entice even more people to the area, leading to the gradual establishment of a permanent settlement.

Meanwhile, adventurer-training academies within cities were often built directly on top of these labyrinths. The instructors, all of whom possessed a certain level of ability, were the first line of defense against the dangers within the labyrinth—as were the talented youths they had gathered to receive their teachings. In that sense, the school as a whole was expected to serve as a sort of lid to seal the dangers away from the general populace.

On the school's side of things, fulfilling this role meant receiving tax-funded support. Not to mention that the shallower, less dangerous parts of the labyrinth could be used as an excellent training ground for the students.

"Usually, only the shallowest levels are open to students, but all restrictions will be lifted for the practical examination."

"By the sound of it, it's not like the labyrinth *belongs* to the academy. You can't just go in as an adventurer?"

"That might have worked with any other labyrinth," Lapis replied with a somber face. "The one beneath Wolfe is something of an exception. Wolfe Academy holds complete ownership over it, and it forbids entry to all outsiders."

“Well, why’s that?”

Loren did not in the least understand the merits of owning a labyrinth. Sure, the items excavated from within it could no doubt turn a pretty profit, but barring all outside entry would inevitably inspire antipathy in the rest of the adventuring community. It was also hard to believe that the students and teachers conducted any particularly profitable expeditions.

“There’s a bit of speculation, but nothing definite. Perhaps the Wolfe labyrinth is far less dangerous than its size would suggest, or perhaps it has certain resources they would stop at nothing to monopolize. Or maybe there’s something terribly dangerous sealed within it, something they want to keep concealed from anyone who might not already know of it.”

These were all questionable rumors at best—at least, that was how Lapis saw them. All she knew for certain was that Wolfe Academy had somehow locked down exclusive ownership of the labyrinth under its campus.

“Can’t say I’m interested, but you’re saying you’ll find what you’re looking for there?” Loren asked.

“I’m saying there is a high possibility.” With those words and none further, Lapis nodded in earnest.

Loren exhaled a long, shallow sigh. “Well, fine. Not like we got any other leads. Let’s take the job.”

“I knew I could count on you, Mr. Loren. Let’s apply as a party of two. I’ll handle the transportation and preparation.”

The moment Loren gave his consent, Lapis swiftly swept up the quest posting and rushed from the bar to the reception desk with a skip in her step. As Loren watched her go, his second order of cheap swill finally arrived. He filled his mouth with that foul-tasting drink, whose only saving grace was high alcohol content.

<Hey, Mister—isn’t your weapon a bit big to swing around in a labyrinth?>

The sword Loren had used as a mercenary had already been considerably large. His new black blade was even longer. It wasn’t made for fighting in tight spaces. What’s more, he’d only just started using it, and he had quite a ways to

go before it would feel like a true extension of his limbs. It was entirely possible that he wouldn't be able to wield it properly in the narrow confines of a labyrinth.

"Well, I can use it well enough, as long as there's a bit of space."

If the quest posting was to be trusted, Loren's main job would be to accompany the students, not to fight. In an emergency, he would need to keep the students alive, but as long as nothing too dicey happened, he was given to think that this might well work out. The labyrinth was, after all, the sort of place that an institution would send its own students into. The way Loren saw it, the instructors wouldn't send their kids into even the shallower stretches if the labyrinth contained anything they couldn't handle.

<I highly recommend preparing a side weapon.>

"I'd agree with you there, but I'd have to dig myself even deeper into debt for that."

Although he knew Lapis wouldn't collect, it was a sub-optimal feeling to see the sum of his debt increase. Even a completely ordinary weapon would require a good bit of silver.

"And there's no telling what strange thing she'll have me buy next. Though I guess I should get myself a dagger."

Loren's remaining hazard pay would likely cover that much, and if it didn't, he could scrounge up some scrap metal and hammer out a dagger with the blacksmithing contraption from Hansa. Though if he did, he would have to do it in secret. Lapis would kick up a fuss if she ever found out he had avoided relying on her. Loren sighed as he gazed at the waves in his mug of cheap ale.

"So why are you here?" Loren asked in a less-than-friendly tone.

The red-haired individual faltered a bit, but he answered. "What's wrong with me taking a request from my own alma mater?"

"So this is your school we're headed to?"

The world, which seemed so vast at first glance, really was so small. Loren's

tired eyes had fallen on Claes, who was shrinking a bit where he sat on the other side of the carriage. Loren was still a copper-rank adventurer. The fact that an iron rank like Claes had taken the same job meant that the quest had no rank restrictions.

Next to Claes sat his party members: Ange the magician, Leila the knight-ish woman, and Laure the priest, in that order. The day after Lapis had submitted the paperwork and declared she would handle all their transportation, Loren had found himself boarding a guild carriage and sharing the ride with some familiar faces.

“Weren’t you hospitalized or something?” Loren asked.

“Sure was. Your priest did a number on me.” Claes said this with the tone of a man who nursed a grudge.

However, the ponytailed culprit beside Loren smiled beatifically, not offering any particular reaction.

Claes went on. “Thing is, it was just some mental fatigue and a bit of whipping. They said I could be released so long as the wounds closed up. I decided I shouldn’t take any quests that’d get in the way of my recovery, so here I am.”

“Meaning this job’s gonna be smooth sailing?” Loren asked.

“As long as nothing happens. We just need to walk with the students. Pretty straightforward, right?”

Those words did make Loren feel a little uneasy, but the job sounded simple enough. Of course, his goal wasn’t to make easy money off some kids. His true aim was to find the piece of Lapis’s body supposedly tucked away in this underground labyrinth. He would either have to sneak off when the students weren’t looking or guide the students in that direction. It was entirely likely that this whole thing wouldn’t be so simple after all, at least not for him.

“Not to mention, the students taking the practical are generally pretty skilled. You’ll only find goblins and kobolds in the shallower parts of that labyrinth. Honestly, it would be harder for something to go wrong.”

“You shouldn’t dismiss goblins out of hand. They’re tricky bastards,” Loren

absentmindedly muttered.

Claes seemed a little startled by this. Goblins were the sort of pests that any competent villager could deal with. Claes clearly didn't know what he was supposed to do with this admonishment. However, he also plainly felt a certain weight in Loren's words and could tell he shouldn't dismiss them either.

"It's just an honest warning," said Loren. "Up to you whether you take it."

"R-really? Got it... I'll take it to heart." For a moment, Claes seemed to worry that he was being mocked, but Loren's face and tone were the epitome of seriousness. It really was a heartfelt piece of advice.

"That aside, your buddy there keeps giving me a look." Loren had realized mid-conversation that Ange the magician's attention kept shifting between the window and himself. "You need something?"

It seemed Ange hadn't noticed she'd been found out, though in Loren's point of view, her glancing was so blatantly obvious that he couldn't comprehend how anyone could have failed to pick up on it. It was starting to get on his nerves, which was the only reason he brought it up.

"Oh, yeah, Ange's..." Claes trailed off. "C'mon, Ange, you can say it."

"Umm... During our last quest, I heard it was you who saved me," Ange mumbled.

During their previous run-in with Claes, Ange had been attacked by a bone dragon near Hansa, suffering near-fatal injuries in the process. Loren had been the one to save her from the undead beast's massive jaws. Ange had apparently heard about it from one of her comrades, once she'd recovered.

"Guess so, in a way."

"I want to offer my thanks, Mr. Loren. I would have surely died had you not come to my aid."

"Sorry for stealing the limelight from your boyfriend. I'm sure he'll manage some dashing rescue next time."

Loren had by now managed to grasp that Claes had a thing for Ange. He certainly didn't have any intentions of putting Ange in his debt; he hadn't

expected any gratitude to begin with. He honestly, un-cynically hoped Claes would be the one to have her back if some similar peril befell her again.

“Yes, I’ll be counting on him.”

“Though here’s hoping he’s got nothing to worry about.”

A hero who saved the damsel in her time of crisis—that certainly had a nice ring to it. However, if Loren had his druthers, he would have all those in his care avoid crises altogether.

“I’ll do my best to meet your expectations, Ange.”

“Claes...”

The two stared into each other’s eyes, taking each other by the hand—and Loren quietly looked away.

The guild’s carriage wasn’t particularly spacious, and it seemed only these two parties were participating in the quest, meaning they were the only ones around. Despite the close quarters, a young man and woman were whispering sweet nothings into each other’s ears. Loren felt he should have been somewhere else entirely—so much so that he was inclined to throw himself out of the carriage.

Laure and Leila wore fantastically unpleasant expressions, glaring at the couple, who remained in their own little world. Meanwhile, to Loren’s side, Lapis looked like she had received some great epiphany; her faraway gaze wandered with no goal in sight.

Loren wished for nothing more than to arrive at their destination, and fast, but physical distance wasn’t something that could be shortened with a wish and a prayer. According to the briefing he had received in Kaffa, even if they’d left town at the break of dawn, they wouldn’t arrive at Wolfe Academy until nightfall.

Then I might as well sleep, he concluded.

Most things in life worked themselves out in the space of a good nap. Someone in his old company had told him as much, once before. When Loren had first heard those words, he’d thought, *What’s this slacker going off about?*

In his current predicament, they struck him as the profound wisdom of a great sage.

“I’m going to sleep, Lapis. Wake me up whenever.”

“Of course. Sweet dreams, Mr. Loren.” Lapis sounded as if she were desperately stifling some emotion to maintain her calm.

Loren let his gaze trail out the window before shutting his eyes. He waited patiently and intently for sleep to take his mind away.

Loren didn’t know how much time had passed since then. He opened his eyes to a gentle rocking of his shoulder. He shook his hazy head to drive off drowsiness and lifted his body from where it had slumped against the side of the carriage. Lapis was holding him by the shoulder, softly rousing him.

“The driver said we’ll arrive soon.”

“I see. Thanks for waking me.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it.”

He took his eyes off Lapis, turning them back to the rest of the carriage, only to find himself astounded by what he saw. Claes’s party, sitting across from them, were to a one soundly asleep, loudly snoring with their mouths open wide. If it had been just one or two of them who dozed off, he would have understood. Things happened. But all four was a bit much. He couldn’t help but feel something artificial at work, and he glanced doubtfully at Lapis.

“What did you do?”

“That mood was getting rather unbearable, so I may have surreptitiously cast *Sleep*.”

Loren cursed to himself. He had fled to dreamland before Lapis did, meaning there had been no one left to rein in her ruthless impulses. Without someone to keep her in check, she was the sort who bottled up all her stress until it spiked—at which point she abruptly resorted to drastic measures.

“Ain’t that a bit reckless?”

“It’s all right. I did it secretly. No one’s going to remember,” she replied, sounding ever so confident.

Loren wasn’t the least bit convinced. Not only was Lapis a priest using magic—incredible in and of itself—in this instance, she hadn’t even loosed it upon her enemies. How could that possibly be *all right*? On the off chance that someone did notice her doing this sort of thing, it might prove to be a fatal error with terrible consequences.

Then Scena, lurking as ever in the corner of his vision, reassured him. *<It’s all right, Mister. The redhead and his friends fell asleep without noticing a thing.>*

How d’you know that? he asked.

As it turned out, Scena had let her astral body peek very slightly out of Loren while he slept, and that had been right about the time when Lapis cast her magic.

<I just peeked a little, I promise. Lapis didn’t see me.>

They didn’t actually know whether Lapis *could* see Scena’s astral projection, but it would be far better to work under the assumption that she could.

Negligence will be our undoing, Loren thought, and Scena meekly nodded to this.

“Is something wrong, Mr. Loren?”

“It’s nothing. Just coming down with a headache, thanks to a certain someone.”

“Is that so? You really ought to take better care of yourself. More importantly, that’s our destination over there.” Lapis pointed out the carriage window.

A considerable amount of time had passed since Loren fell asleep. The sun had begun to redden, and it illuminated an impressively large town as well as its surrounding landscape.

Kaffa was decently sized, all things considered, but compared to Kaffa, this was a massive metropolis. According to Lapis, it was a trade city called Monte Lugar. It didn’t have any particular specialty products, but the resources regularly excavated or otherwise supplied by the adventurers’ academy kept its

industries hopping across the board.

“On top of that, the town is frequented by the noble scions who attend the academy, as well as by their relatives. The merchants gather to cater to them, and business is consequently booming, or so I’ve heard.”

“Not the sort of place I’d visit, then.”

Civilians tended to keep their distance from those in the mercenary line of work. There was little to be done about this, as those in the trade earned their bread with the detestable work of war. The company Loren belonged to had been relatively well regulated, as far as mercenaries went. Nevertheless, it took all sorts, and some mercenaries could hardly be distinguished from brigands and thieves. For that reason, they were largely shunned in places where normal people flourished. A mercenary’s private life was largely relegated to associations with their close friends and coworkers.

It seemed Lapis had managed to surmise this much from Loren’s brief statement. For a moment, she seemed unsure. Then she replied, “If you’re an adventurer now, it’s exactly the sort of place where you belong.”

“Maybe.”

“Yes, I’m sure of it. We’ll head to the guild as soon as we arrive. I know you’re tired, but the inn and so forth will have to wait.”

“We can’t book an inn first?”

“At this hour, the guild desk will have closed by the time we finish settling in. We need to report our arrival and inform them that we’ve taken the quest.”

“You sure the inn won’t close on us by then?”

If Monte Lugar was a prosperous town, Loren expected there’d be fierce competition for rooms. In his experience of stopping by towns between wars, it had always been a scramble to find rooms for even a handful of men. It wasn’t rare for mercenaries who lost in this scramble to end up camping on the outskirts of town.

“I think we’ll be just fine. Worst-case scenario, we can have the guild introduce us to someone. A guild in a town this big must have a few good

recommendations for adventurers in our situation.”

“What about waking up Claes?”

They had come on the same quest. Loren had found the boy and his party more or less contemptible when they first met, but at present, he didn’t think they were bad people. The thought of abandoning them left him feeling fairly awful, in fact.

“Let’s wait until we’re a little closer to town. Any more of that sweet-talking, and I am afraid I will turn murderous.”

“You have a point.”

Claes and Ange clearly didn’t mean any harm, but that didn’t make them any more fun to watch. Loren accepted Lapis’s decision without any objections.

While the carriage was stopped at the entrance to the city, they were let in rather easily and not subjected to any particularly intense inspections. Other travelers received more exacting once-overs, and as a former mercenary, Loren had expected to receive the same harsh treatment. It always wasted a good deal of time. Strangely, the simplicity of this entrance was a bit of a letdown.

Lapis explained that it was on account of their carriage having been prepared by the adventurers’ guild, including the driver. The guild guaranteed the authenticity of the adventurers it associated with, which meant that so long as they traveled by guild-regulated vehicles, they could enter towns with hardly any inspection.

In that case, Loren wondered if he could just go wherever he wanted if he stole a guild carriage—but it seemed the drivers were paired with their carriages, and there were ciphers and keys involved with the work.

“If either the carriage or the driver is missing, the guild’s guarantee is void,” Lapis went on.

If that weren’t enough, any attempts to falsify or illegally use a guild carriage, once discovered, were immediately met with the death penalty, no exceptions.

In any case, it took just a bit more jostling in the carriage before they arrived

at the Monte Lugar adventurers' guild. The pair said their thanks to the driver as they hopped out, only to realize they had completely forgotten to wake up Claes's party. They convinced themselves that Claes would wake up eventually, or that the driver would lose patience and wake them in due time. They had to see to their own responsibilities first.

As their job would take place at the academy, all they had to do at the guild was hand over the certificate of quest acceptance they had received before leaving Kaffa. It was over in no time at all.

"Let's ask where we can find an inn and call it a day," said Lapis.

It was already beginning to grow dark outside. The school had shut its gates, so visiting it would have to wait until the next morning.

"Tomorrow, we'll head to the academy after breakfast and ask our client—the Headmaster—for further instructions. Does that sound all right?"

"No complaints. Is this quest really supposed to be this laid-back?"

"It seems that once a proctor arrives, they select a team to go with them. It's an involved process. Their examinees don't necessarily enter the labyrinth all at once."

"Makes sense. Might be a pain, though," Loren murmured after he'd thought about it for a bit.

Lapis looked a bit perplexed. "What will be a pain, exactly?"

"There are gonna be multiple teams, right? I don't know how big the place is, but if they all go in at once, you've got more guarantee that you've got an ally if things get rough."

"Oh, yes, if only one team is allowed at a given time, they will be essentially isolated in the labyrinth. The difficulty of the exam would likely increase."

"Exactly my point. Though I guess in your case, it'll be more convenient if there are fewer people nosing around."

Once they leveraged their position as exam proctors to enter the labyrinth, Lapis would need to conduct her own search, and she would need to operate subtly so as not to be found out. The more teams that were running around, the

higher the chance that she would be spotted. An unfavorable situation, certainly.

“Well, I do have a way of getting around that, if it comes to it.”

“Let’s hear it,” said Loren, even as he thought, *It’s definitely not gonna be anything good.*

Lapis peered at him as if it were blatantly obvious. “If we just incapacitate everyone—”

“All right, I got it. Having fewer teams is better for me too.”

Even as a hardened mercenary, Loren felt a pang in his heart at the thought of putting students out of commission merely for Lapis’s convenience. He was willing to work to keep her search away from prying eyes.

But taking out students... The second he thought those words, Loren realized that he had, for some reason, known he would be the one doing the dirty work. He shook the thought from his head.

“Oh, it’s all right,” Lapis insisted. “I’ll do it quietly, before they realize what’s going on.”

“Give it a rest. They’re students, right? This is their exam. How are you going to take responsibility if they fail?”

“There’s always next year.”

“I’m not helping you.”

“I thought not,” Lapis declared, and she even managed not to sound particularly disappointed.

As Loren began to wonder if he would be able to stop her if she actually attempted anything, Lapis gave him a sunny smile and waved her hands before her chest. “I’m only joking, of course. I’ll think of something better if it comes down to it.”

“Your jokes make my blood run cold.”

“Then how about we warm it back up? Some food and ale should do the trick.”

It was right around time for dinner. Lapis didn't enjoy rowdy establishments, and while in the past, Loren had often been dragged to town entertainment districts by his fellow mercenaries, there was no longer anyone to invite him. He was completely unfamiliar with Monte Lugar, though if he wanted to drink, he believed he would be perfectly satisfied with the guild's bar. This was all to say that he didn't feel inclined to wander.

Fortunately, Lapis ushered Loren toward the guild bar. Unlike in Kaffa, the staff of this guild had no knowledge of Loren's circumstances. In Kaffa, even when he placed an order without paying up, the staff knew that Lapis would come around to pay later, so he was still served. In other places, Loren had to eat out of his measly pocket change or share a meal with Lapis.

"You're not going to say you want to eat all by your lonesome, are you?"

"Not exactly." Loren was still sentimental enough to feel that food just didn't taste right when he ate alone.

"Then let's eat together. We're already set for the inn, after all."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Apparently, this guild runs an inn on its upper floors. I managed to book a room for two, so we're not going to be sleeping on the streets."

Loren knew of several bars that put up guests on their second floor, but he had already considered the guild's bar to be their side venture; he hadn't thought they would go as far as to manage an inn as well—a side venture of a side venture. He wondered just how far they intended to cast their financial net, but to be fair, inns and bars were both indispensable to adventurers. Some guild outposts probably traded in weapons and armor as well.

"We won't know how long we'll be in the labyrinth until tomorrow's briefing. We might have to manage on preserved foods for a while, so let's splurge a bit today."

Lapis hadn't managed to obtain any details on the exam in advance, but she explained that an expedition into a labyrinth could take days or even weeks. As they would be accompanying students, Lapis found it hard to assume that it would be such a long haul, but she could easily see the academy mandating

preserved food only, just to ensure their charges were used to it.

“There’s no need for us to follow the same restrictions, but it would be dreadfully awkward to have a sumptuous feast right next to the students being forced to gnaw on dried meat.”

“Can’t say I disagree,” Loren said, taking a seat at the bar. He handed the menu to Lapis without even looking at it.

Lapis looked it over and decided on her own order before sending a quizzical look at Loren.

“Order whatever for me,” he said. “You’re the one paying, after all.”

“You can order whatever you want,” Lapis said, not denying that she would be the one footing the bill.

Loren, however, shrugged. “I’ve been to my fair share of pubs, but at most of them, you can just say, ‘Get me some meat,’ and that’ll be the end of it. I’ve got no idea what to order.”

“That’s...interesting to say the least. What did you do in Kaffa?”

“I trusted the waitress’s recommendations.”

Loren had become a regular customer at the guild bar in Kaffa, and the waitresses all knew his face. At first, he really had only asked for meat, but once they’d broken the ice a bit, the girls had begun telling him the daily special or whatever they enjoyed most on the menu.

This was an exceedingly valuable source of information to Loren, who hardly concerned himself with food. However, this was obviously the first time he had visited the Monte Lugar establishment. It wasn’t as if the waitresses here wanted anything to do with him.

Loren had assumed he would have no choice but to place a generic order again, but if Lapis was eating with him, perhaps he could foist the responsibility off on her.

“I think it’s in your best interest to develop at least a little interest in these things,” she said.

“On the battlefield, you’re grateful when you get to eat at all. Sure, good taste

is a plus, but food serves its purpose as long as it fills you up.”

It wasn't rare for Loren to have nothing on his plate. He prioritized quantity over quality. Most times, his meals weren't a source of enjoyment and were rather a necessary activity to prevent himself from dying of starvation. This had been the case so often that he had begun to think that the nature of food didn't matter as long as it fit in his mouth.

“How uninspired—but there's no sense complaining about it now. What's done is done.” Lapis went on muttering something quite foreboding about having to rehabilitate him, then began to consider his meal alongside her own.

Confident that Lapis could handle it, Loren took the opportunity to look around the bar. The atmosphere wasn't so different from the establishment in Kaffa. Moderately boisterous, moderately run-down, moderately grimy, and moderately jolly. As long as a bar served the same function, perhaps it inevitably shared a similar vibe. At least, that was what Loren thought until his eyes locked on a group that stood out from the rest.

A party of awfully young kids. With three boys and one girl, they were somewhat unbalanced, but they seemed to get along well enough. They were speaking in low voices and were deeply immersed in their conversation as they curiously glanced around. Their table was lined with humble food and a few cups, but they hadn't ordered any form of alcohol.

How often did adventurers come to a bar to do anything but drink? Loren couldn't help but study them. At least, he did until his observations were cut short by a group of mean-spirited adventurers.

As they passed this out-of-place group, one of those adventurers zeroed in on the lone girl—a sprightly kid with short black hair. The girl's comrades stood, trying to put a stop to this, but the adventurer's buddies got in their way, preventing them from coming to her aid.

Seeing the kids in distress—the girl obviously upset and her comrades blocked—Loren stood without prompting from Lapis. Plenty of mercenaries got it in their heads to argue with staff of all varieties, and even if they went too far, this was often played off with a laugh. However, if they belonged to a decent company, any mercenary who got rough with a fellow customer would be

rightfully dogpiled by his own comrades.

Loren had been raised with these expectations and norms, and he therefore could not ignore the scene unfolding before his eyes.

As Loren made his way toward the quarrel, Lapis called out, “Mr. Loren?” But her eyes never left the menu. Loren turned, wondering if she was going to tell him to keep his head out of trouble. But all she said was: “Get involved if you want, but no killing, okay? I don’t want to end up in jail before the job’s even begun.”

“Of course, I know. I’ll hold back.”

“I agree that they’re an absolute bother, but make it quick. I’ll have ordered by the time you’re back,” she said, showing no real concern for the matter.

“I’m counting on you,” he said, and he proceeded on his way.

With Lapis idly seeing him off, Loren went on toward the quarrel only to find himself startled by the supposed victims. He had realized they were young from afar, but up close, they seemed like little more than children. They couldn’t have been older than fourteen or fifteen—the world at large classified all such folks as firmly in the age of minority. The age of adulthood varied by region but was generally somewhere around sixteen.

The adventurers messing with them had considerably more years under their belt. One of them, who looked a bit older than Loren, had grabbed the girl by the arm and was trying to drag her somewhere.

As she was pulled away, the girl’s face was stricken with shock. Her comrades consisted of a well-built boy with short blond hair, a somewhat flighty-looking boy with longish brown hair, and another boy with the same brown hair in a bowl cut. The last one wore the clothes of a priest; he was a little shorter and seemed especially timid.

In the time it took Loren to survey the group, both the adventurers and the kids had noticed him and seemed somewhat taken aback. Everyone stopped moving.

“Wh-who the hell are you?” the adventurer who was grabbing the girl’s arm snapped in a threatening voice.

Loren offered no immediate response. Instead, he spent a moment closely inspecting the girl’s face. She stared back at him, wide-eyed and confused. After a moment, he asked her, “You’re not messing around, are you?”

“N-not at all! These guys suddenly demanded I have a drink with them...”

“Hah!” The adventurer holding her leered. “I see a brat loitering around a bar at this hour, of course I’m gonna show her how to properly enjoy the place!”

The girl tried to shake her arm free, but she couldn’t wrest herself from the adventurer’s grip. She remained in his grasp no matter how much she struggled.

Having confirmed her distress, Loren called out to the three boys who had been intercepted by the other adventurers. “Want help?”

“Yes, please! Help us!” said the blond boy.

“Shut it! We don’t need none of it!” the flippant one snapped.

“Hey, c’mon, Cloud!” protested the bowl-cut kid, trying to mediate.



The blond boy looked like the bulkiest and best physically trained, so the fact that he'd been first to request help meant he was either weak-willed or definitely cornered. Neither option was good, so far as Loren was concerned.

Either way, for now, he had come intending to help, and the specific opinions of each boy didn't actually matter all that much.

"What's your deal?" The adventurer holding the girl sneered. "Sticking your nose where it don't belong? No one asked for you. Get lost!"

Loren paid his bravado no mind and wrapped his hand around the man's wrist. "I don't think good brats should be loitering around a bar."

An ominous grating sound came from the wrist in his grasp. Before the adventurer's ears could register what was causing it, the pain filled him in. These were the shrieks of flesh and bone. His bones ground into each other, his flesh compressed and squelched. Blood could no longer reach beyond the point where his wrist was enclosed in this vice-like grip, and as his fingers began to numb, Loren looked him in the eye, expression flat and unchanging.

"But no good adults start business with brats."

"G-gah! Y-you bastard! Let go of me! Who do you think you are?!"

The adventurer had released the girl without thinking, but the force crushing his wrist continued regardless. He flailed to free his arm, but it was as if his wrist had been fixed in space, and he could only watch, unmoving, as his hand was pulverized by this unbelievable grip. Unable to bear it any longer, he begged for help from his comrades who were still blocking the boys.

"Oi! Forget them! Do something about this! My hand's gonna come off!"

This wail finally tipped them off—something wasn't right. The adventurers surrounded Loren, though he paid them no mind and continued to slowly increase the pressure.

"Stop it! Let him go!" one of the other adventurers screamed. Blood had begun to drip from between two of Loren's fingers. This didn't just mean he'd broken the bones in the man's hand—it meant that the fragments of his pulverized bones had pierced his skin. The adventurer could tell that at this

rate, he would never be able to use it again.

“Leave off already!” One of the adventurers reflexively pulled a dagger.

They were in a bar run by the adventurers’ guild, which did not tolerate drawn weapons on the premises—and meted out strict punishment to anyone who violated the rule. The man knew that, but he was blinded by a pressing need to put a stop to this and couldn’t presently make rational decisions.

“If you guys stand down, I’ll let him go,” said Loren. “How does that sound?”

Even faced with the glimmer of a blade drawn in the dim bar light, Loren showed no sign of releasing his victim. However, the look in his eyes had changed. Up to that point, Loren had seen the adventurers as human beings, if wretched ones. Now he was looking at them as if they were mere objects.

The adventurers saw this whether they wanted to or not. Precisely because they understood his look, they realized they had done what could never be undone. If they listened to Loren and withdrew, they would be seen as cowards who drew their weapons on an unarmed man and still fled in the end. But if they stood their ground, one crushed wrist would doubtless be the least of their worries.

“His arm’s almost beyond repair,” said Loren.

As they dawdled, Loren’s fingers dug and dug. The bones had already been crushed, and the amount of blood flowing from between his fingers had become unnerving. It was nevertheless still a problem that could be resolved with a hefty donation to a high-ranking priest.

These delinquent adventurers were all experienced enough to see as much, so Loren pressed them to decide. Either continue past the point of no return or retreat at the risk of ruining their reputation. They would suffer either way, but Loren was letting them pick their poison.

The one who’d drawn his dagger sheathed it and presented his opposite hand. “Fine. We’re done here. Let him go, would you?”

“You’re not lying, are you?”

“I know what’ll happen if I go back on my word. We’ll retreat, I swear, so let

go of him already! He's frothing at the mouth, for god's sake!"

Loren glanced at the man's face. He was out cold, a white foam spurting from between his lips. He had apparently been unable to endure the pain, to say nothing of the sight of his bones piercing through his flesh and skin.

After Loren released the unconscious adventurer, he slumped limply to the floor, and his comrades rushed to scoop him back up.

"You gonna say something like 'I'll remember this'?" Loren asked the adventurers as they made their way out.

To his mild surprise, the one who had drawn his dagger frantically shook his head. "I'd prefer if we both forgot this ever happened. If a guy like you remembered us, we'd never be able to risk picking up chicks again."

No lingering grudges after the matter was resolved, huh? Loren was once again impressed with adventurers as a breed. Had those fellows been ill-mannered mercenaries or some other variety of thug, they would have snarled out some parting words about paying him back in kind. He thought it rather earnest of them to cut any potential trouble off at the pass whenever possible.

"Next time, you should pick better fights," he called after the man.

"I'll take that to heart."

As they left, Loren at last noticed the copper tags around their necks. Not even iron? Loren worried that he might have gone too far. Most adventurers ranked either iron or copper, and they were awfully numerous. Of course, there were all sorts in every rank. Loren found himself wondering what variety those fellows had been, but they were already long gone.

Looks like there won't be any retribution this time, he thought as the girl they'd targeted timidly reached out to him.

"Umm... Thank you."

"Don't worry about it. I was just in the right mood to do something." Loren had been moved to help her by nothing more than his personal beliefs. As such, he hadn't done it for gratitude. He waved his goodbyes.

"But you still saved me, nonetheless!" she said.

“Glad to hear it—is what I’d like to say, but you’re still minors, right? Stick around here, and there’ll be more trouble.”

They looked entirely defenseless, or perhaps just easy to pick on. In any case, this had partly happened because their collective aura practically screamed “easy mark.” They were well within the age range of what Loren considered children, so while he knew it was none of his business, he couldn’t help but offer some words of warning.

She bowed her head. “I’m sorry...”

With no adventurers left to get in their way, the three boys had gathered the courage to come closer—but the flighty one lashed out at Loren.

“Hey, Pops! What makes you think you can lecture us like you—”

“Quit it, Cloud,” whispered the bowl-cut kid, desperately trying to calm his friend. “He saved us.”

“Come on, Al! That’s no reason for him to—”

“Just give it a rest.”

Had they been just a little older—around Claes’s age, perhaps—Loren might have felt like knocking them into shape, just a bit. However, at their age, he felt it wasn’t his job to discipline them. Their personality problems weren’t his issue. He ignored the lot and turned his back to leave, only for the blond boy to step in front of him.

“I’m the leader of this party. My name is Ein. Please, let me express my gratitude.”

“Don’t need it. I got involved because I wanted to. You need to pick a better place to chat next time. Especially when you’re not strong enough to handle trouble.”

“I-I’m really sorry. I just thought we needed to experience a bit of the bar atmosphere to pep us up.”

It seemed they had their own circumstances, but that was none of Loren’s concern. Pushing past Ein before he could say any more, Loren headed back to Lapis without turning back again.

“Welcome back, Mr. Loren. You didn’t destroy any furniture this time,” she said the moment he was within earshot.

He took these words with a wry smile. He understood that had it come to blows, he likely would have exceeded her expectations with more than a touch of property damage.

“If I had to pay the fines, I’d be left penniless all over again,” he said.

“I don’t doubt that.”

“But I’m surprised that those kids were actually a party of sorts.”

“They were?” Lapis mused. “In that case... It depends, really, but we might be seeing them again soon.”

“What do you mean?”

“Who knows? I can’t say I’m certain, and it would be more fun to just wait and see.”

Loren didn’t see what was fun about that, but he sighed and resigned himself to watching Lapis flip through the menu—she had yet to decide on an order.

Chapter 2:

Encirclement to Departure

THE NEXT DAY, Loren and Lapis set out to meet with their client—the Wolfe Adventurer Training Academy. Loren had been a little concerned about whether the previous night’s adventurers would renege on their vows and come seeking retribution, but it seemed that had been a needless concern on his part. He’d spent a peaceful night in the inn with ample rest and peace of mind.

For the first time in his life, Loren entered a school—he hadn’t even really seen one before. For argument’s sake, he understood that a school was a place where children learned to be wise, cultured, and experienced. But because Loren had been with the mercenary company by the time he knew his own name, he had never attended one.

Mercenaries generally had little in the way of schooling, and many of them couldn’t read or even do basic calculations. In Loren’s case, not knowing how to read or crunch numbers would have been an issue when it came to negotiating work contracts—or at least, that was the reason the company’s clerical manager had given when he insisted on teaching Loren.

“The more I hear about your company, the more I think it must have been quite the sophisticated operation,” Lapis said, sounding eminently intrigued as she passed through the gates beside him. “I’ve never heard of a brigade that offered its members such a degree of education.”

“You think so? It was pretty normal for us. I mean, given the industry and all, we had our fair share of mean folk, but most of our men could read, and a good number could at least write their own names.”

“You must understand, that’s a feat in itself. If you did a circuit of the sticks asking the villagers to write their names, you’d find hardly a single one who could.”

“Yeah, well, they don’t have to sign contracts.”

“I really don’t think that’s the problem.”

For the most part, children weren't provided access to proper education. Lapis noted that in a number of countries, only the nobility were even afforded the opportunity. She seemed to find the fact that an organization as humble as a mercenary company had done so to be more abnormal than special.

"Your captain was either exceptional or utterly mad..."

"Hey, Lapis. What do you reckon that is?" Loren tiredly dragged Lapis back to reality before she could spiral any deeper into her thoughts. She looked in the direction of his finger. He had indicated a crowd of people raising a ruckus, and a shrill one at that.

Something had clearly attracted the attention of a multitude of people—mainly young women. Loren couldn't see what they were crowding around from the fringe, though given that the cheers and shrieks were nearly at peak intensity, he was sure it had to be astonishing.

"This *is* a school, right?" he asked.

"Supposedly. Perhaps they're on recess or an independent study period—you wouldn't ever see something like this during class time."

But it was still early morning, and it was a little hard to imagine it was already time for a break.

And shouldn't there be teachers rounding them up? Loren thought, looking around.

Indeed, he spotted a few teacher-looking individuals, but they all seemed more resigned than anything, as if they were tacitly accepting that this riot was frankly inevitable. They watched from afar, and not a single one tried to break up the crowd.

"What could it be?" Lapis mused.

"Who knows. Guess it's got nothing to do with us." Loren had only brought it up because he noticed it, but he swiftly lost interest.

Then, suddenly, there was a movement within the crowd. Whatever had been in the center was now parting the sea of people, attempting to venture into the outside world. This much was obvious, yet each time the crowd moved, the

shrill cries seemed to rise in volume. Merely touching that moving thing seemed to spark joy.

“Something’s coming out,” Lapis said.

“More like hatching,” said Loren.

The edge of the crowd finally broke away, revealing a redheaded man in a ceremonial navy-blue suit. He looked a little younger than Loren, and both Lapis and Loren knew him well. They were still taken aback at the phenomenon of his rebirth.

“Ah, I found you at just the right time,” the man said. “You’re going to get the details on the job, right? Let me go with you.”

“Claes? I know we’re on the same quest and all, so I’m not gonna ask why you’re *here*. But what the hell were you doing in *there*?”

It seemed that breaking free of the crowd had been considerably tiring, and even prettied up as he was, Claes couldn’t conceal his fatigue. The swarm of girls behind him continued to stare longingly after him, their eyes glistening with envy and affection.

Claes dutifully paid them no mind as he replied to Loren. “Well, I told you this is my alma mater, right? It’s been a while since I came here, so I thought I’d dress up a bit...and then I got mobbed.”

“That mob of yours is still waiting right behind you.”

“Hoo boy. You still have class, don’t you?” he called to the herd. “I have to go discuss work with the headmaster.”

“Will you be overseeing the labyrinth exam?!” one of the girls asked, and the others around her grew visibly excited.

Holding up his hands to preemptively fend off another round of swarming, Claes smiled tightly. “Something like that—though the headmaster has the final say. So, uh...ah, hey, Loren! Don’t just leave me behind!”

Why is this my problem now? Loren thought when Claes called out before he could leave unnoticed. He turned back to Claes, looking rather peeved.

Claes’s adoring crowd eyed Loren with open enmity as Claes jogged over to

him.

“We’re on the same quest,” said Claes. “What’s wrong with going together?”

“You seemed occupied. We can take care of ourselves, so why not keep your cute underclassmen company for a bit, and—hold up. Where’s your party?”

“When I said I was going to the academy, they told me to go alone. I don’t know why, but they hate coming here—even though we all graduated together.”

Of course they hate it, thought Loren as he glanced at the wave of hostile eyes behind Claes.

For whatever reason, it seemed the man called Claes was enormously popular with the student body. It was easy to imagine any woman receiving a truly menacing amount of hate simply for being in his general vicinity.

“Anyways, this is my school, so I want to show you around. Isn’t that reason enough to take me with you?” Claes closed in, adding in a whisper, “Otherwise, I don’t think I’ll get away at this rate.”

Loren still saw this as a pain, but it also occurred to him then that while this school principally recruited those of talent, not a few individuals in the student body were the offspring of powerful individuals. If Claes happened to get on their bad side, there was no telling what awaited him. Maybe that was why he couldn’t take a strong stance against all this attention. In short, he suddenly seemed too pitiful to ignore.

“Fine, fine. Let’s go.”

Loren grabbed Claes by the shoulder, roughly pushing him into the lead.

A chorus of protests followed them.

“What are you doing to Claes?!”

“Don’t touch him with those filthy hands of yours!”

“Where are you taking Claes? I haven’t finished talking to him yet!”

Claes turned pale at the words chasing them up the steps. He was well aware that Loren was the sort of person whom it was generally dangerous to insult.

And this particular barrage was entirely Claes's fault. He somewhat frantically turned, seeming about to throw himself back to the wolves, but Loren acted first.

He turned to face the students, and something within his stance, his aura, silenced them instantly. While he didn't speak with much in the way of volume, his tone carried clear across the crowd.

"Quit your yapping, or I'll quit it for you."

He didn't so much as reach for the sword on his back, but the clear threat in his voice caused the girls to turn pale. Worse, a number of the ones closest to the steps collapsed, fainting on the spot. Conscious and otherwise, several students wet their skirts and trousers, a few falling into outright panic.



What followed was a chorus of crying, screaming, and enraged yells. Loren was startled, to say the least. He understood he had been the cause of this outburst, but he had only intended to intimidate them into leaving. Swooning and incontinence had not been part of the plan.

“Aren’t they a bit fragile to be your peers?”

“No, you’ve got my blood running cold too,” Claes stammered.

Meanwhile, Lapis peered at Loren with a baffled expression. His attempt at intimidation hadn’t hit her as it had everyone else—it was more that she seemed suspicious that something truly extraordinary had unfolded right before her eyes.

Did I do something weird? Loren wondered as Scena popped up in the corner of his eye.

<Perhaps I shouldn’t have mixed a dash of Lifeless King into your aura.> She smiled.

What are you doing? Loren sighed, but she flitted around his field of view, making a face as if she couldn’t contain her irritation.

<I mean, they called you filthy, Mister. You’re just going to take that?>

Loren didn’t really know how to respond. A part of him felt a little happy she had gotten angry for his sake, but this chaos felt a bit out of hand.

I appreciate the sentiment, but let’s tone it down next time, he told her. And while she didn’t look convinced, she nodded and disappeared once more.

“I have the strangest feeling. Like I just sensed a flash of an ominous presence,” Lapis said flatly, staring at him.

Presumably, Scena had only exercised a mote of power and for just a split second, yet Lapis had picked up on it. Astonished as he was by her sensitivity, Loren played dumb. “I didn’t feel a thing.”

“Oh, really? Perhaps I’m imagining...no, perhaps you’re genuinely just a profoundly terrifying person, Mr. Loren. Enough so that you can induce such a disaster with a mere threat.”

“These students are just delicate. I mean, we’re all battle-hardened survivors. Guess I’m just a bit much for brats who’ve never seen real combat.”

Lapis still didn’t seem convinced, but she also didn’t offer any other explanations. While she cocked her head quizzically, she didn’t pry further. “Is that how it works? In any case, back to work.”

“The headmaster’s office, right?” said Claes. “I’ll take you there. Follow me.”

With Claes leading the way, Lapis and Loren whispered between themselves.

“Ain’t he acting a bit too friendly? At least, compared to how he was when we first met him?”

“How should I put this? I’m starting to think he’s bottling it up and waiting for the opportune moment to stab us in the back.”

“Can’t you just say I’ve turned over a new leaf? Not that I care...” Claes muttered.

Whichever it was, having a graduate at the lead meant they wouldn’t lose their way. While his shoulders drooped, it didn’t seem like Claes was about to abandon them, and soon they were free of the chaos.

“The Wolfe Adventurer Training Academy was founded three hundred years ago in honor of the adventurer after whom it was named,” Claes explained as they walked, though no one had asked him.

Lapis quietly listened, always eager to collect a new piece of knowledge. As for Loren, the name of some guy from hundreds of years ago did little to entice his interest.

Generally speaking, those in the mercenary profession tended to think simply and in terms of the immediate. Very few thought about the future. Loren shared this mindset for the most part. The clerical manager in charge of Loren’s education had told him day after day to fix that habit, and he had reconfigured himself somewhat. However, his tendency to focus only on the tangible present often came out when he was dealing with matters in which he had absolutely no interest.

Maybe that's why my wallet's so light, Loren thought as Claes's explanation went on.

"I don't think I need to tell you about Wolfe, do I? I could regale you with his achievements for days, and it's no exaggeration to say that almost everyone in this academy aims to someday measure up to his legend."

"Could you please tell me what he achieved? Unfortunately, my priest training has left me rather estranged from general world knowledge," Lapis said, although Loren suspected that she was lying out her ass.

In the first place, Lapis was, in truth, a demon—a race that lived in solitude and secrecy in a small but well-guarded territory. Honestly, he doubted she had completed any holy training whatsoever.

On top of this, Lapis was the sort of girl who never held back on her preliminary investigations. She had known they were headed to Wolfe Academy from the first, and it would have struck him as highly unusual if she hadn't already looked into every aspect of the place.

That left him asking why she was making Claes explain anything at all. Seeming to sense his concern, she leaned over to answer this in a whisper. "I'm just checking my answers."

That made sense. It was always worth comparing your intel with what others had been told.

"Well, let's see," said Claes. "It was too long ago to say whether this is entirely true, but several records credit him with slaying a dragon, and there are tons of accounts of him discovering ruins of the ancient kingdom. Also, he hunted down and sealed away a dark god."

"Have you ever wondered if it was all made up?" Lapis asked, entirely sans tact.

When they'd first met Claes, he would have been infuriated by someone questioning the authenticity of an adventurer he respected, but it seemed he really had matured. He smiled wryly, and he didn't even raise his voice. "I can't blame you for wondering that. But numerous sources have come to consensus on his deeds. And then there's the labyrinth beneath the academy."

“What about it?” Loren asked. As the conversation had segued into something relevant to his work, his interest had reignited.

Claes seemed a bit taken aback by his sudden return to the conversation, but he carried on with a smile. “It’s said that Wolfe himself created the labyrinth beneath the academy.”

“You don’t mean he dug it, do you?” asked Loren. *Though that’s quite an achievement too.*

It just didn’t seem like the kind of accomplishment that adventurers were usually credited with.

“Apparently, he took control of a preexisting labyrinth.”

“You can do that?”

“Some say he figured out the inner workings of the labyrinth’s core, but there are no records left of that. The thing is, if you look around the labyrinth, you’ll see why people think that just might be true.”

Claes went on to explain that the labyrinth beneath the academy was divided into distinct sections—as if it had been organized in terms of difficulty. It seemed to be almost deliberately designed to be a training ground, which had led people to believe that Wolfe had left it behind for the sake of future adventurers.

The shallow floors were relatively safe, while the danger rose the deeper one went. This was the same for other labyrinths too, which led Lapis to ask if this one was really anything special.

“Our labyrinth is ten floors deep, but you can usually only get to the ninth,” said Claes by way of explanation. “You can’t enter the tenth without the headmaster’s permission.”

“Are you saying the proof of Mr. Wolfe’s achievements is on the tenth?”

“I am. I only saw it once before I graduated, mind you. But if you do your job right, and your examinees reach the ninth floor, you’ll be rewarded with entrance to the tenth. They get the headmaster’s permission before the exam begins,” Claes explained.

That sounds important, thought Loren. They had accepted this quest for the purpose of finding a missing part of Lapis's body, and given Claes's explanation, there was a good chance it was on the tenth floor.

As long as they got the students to the ninth floor, it seemed it would be a relatively uncomplicated task. This also explained why the labyrinth wasn't open to the general public. Loren didn't know what defenses the tenth floor possessed, but Claes described a number of defenses that had been put in place to prevent outside adventurers from breaking in and making off with the treasures Wolfe had left behind.

"Oh, and the exam will continue until the students give up hope," said Claes. "You should prepare for a long stay. I believe the record is a whole month."

"And we have to stick with them the entire time? Doesn't sound too profitable, then."

"Yeah—that's why it's mostly only graduates who take the quest. Why did you?"

Loren couldn't answer that question; he couldn't exactly say he had business with the labyrinth.

"Pure curiosity," Lapis replied without missing a beat. "Neither Loren nor I are proper adventurers, so we were interested in what a training academy might be like."

She answered so smoothly that she must have practiced in advance. Claes accepted it without a second thought. Somewhat amazed by her quick thinking, Loren awkwardly averted his eyes.

Finally, Claes led them to the headmaster's office. The request was from the school, but their client was more specifically the headmaster. It was therefore only natural to meet the man himself, and Claes cracked open the doors.

"Well met! I am the Headmaster of the Wolfe Adventurer Training Academy, Wolfe XV!"

Claes stiffened at the voice that suddenly boomed from the open doorway. Loren clapped his hands over his ears while Lapis swiftly darted behind him.

Loren had barely managed to guard himself in time, and Lapis escaped unscathed. Claes, however, had taken the sound waves head-on, and a chill ran down Loren's spine at the sight of the poor man's quivering knees. The chill grew stronger when he saw the ostensible headmaster.

The figure beyond the door looked less like a man than like a small mountain. He wore formal clothes befitting his title, but on a scale that defied common sense. Loren was decently tall himself, but the individual behind the desk was already at his eye level—even while sitting.

“What are you standing there for?! Come in already!”

Loren kept his ears covered; the walls were visibly shaking. Why did this guy think he needed to shout when they were right in front of him? Either way, he gave Claes a push on the back.

Despite the stiff smile on his face, Claes timidly dragged his feet into the room. “It’s b-been a while, headmaster. You haven’t changed one bit.”

“I’m glad to see you’re in good health!”

Loren winced. No matter how hard he covered his ears, the voice bled through. Lapis was holding her head, barely withstanding the assault even from her hiding place.

“U-umm, Headmaster, sir. Could you speak a little softer?”

“Silence, Claes! You think I don’t know what you’ve been up to since you graduated from my school?!”

“I’ve been reflecting on the matter...”

“Hmm? You have? You certainly don’t seem as bad as the rumors say.” The headmaster’s volume dropped ever so slightly. He was still speaking rather loudly, but he had fallen to a level that could be endured without earplugs.

Loren released his head while Lapis nervously peeked out from behind him.

“You’ve had a change of heart, Claes. I see you’ve learned humility.”

“I’m sorry for troubling you.” Claes lowered his head.

The headmaster snorted. “If you’d been as bad as I heard, I would have had to

retrain you from the ground up before I could confidently send you out on your next job.”

“I’ve been blessed with an opportunity to learn.”

“You got lucky.”

The headmaster and Claes carried on a conversation Loren didn’t quite understand, but they reconciled just as incomprehensibly, and that was the end of the matter.

As such, Loren remained at the ready to run at any time even as he called out to the now-satisfied headmaster. “Hey, can we talk about the job yet?”

“Oh, sorry about that. I heard a thing or two about a former student of mine who was getting up to no good. I thought I might need to teach him some manners, but it seems that was unnecessary.”

“Glad to hear it. Please keep that voice in check,” Loren said, all the while wondering if maybe it was actually the headmaster who needed to learn some manners.

The headmaster glanced between Loren and Lapis, as she peeked out from behind Loren’s back, then looked back to Claes. “You’ve brought some skilled fighters this time. Were they the ones who triggered your reform?”

Claes hung his head a bit. “It’s embarrassing, but yes.”

“Hmm. You, big fellow. I need to thank you somehow.”

“I’d lose to you in the size department, I think—but either way, I don’t care for thanks. Let’s just get to the job.”

The headmaster placed two stacks of paper on his desk. They were of normal size, but in this giant’s hands, they looked like tiny scraps. Loren drew closer to pick one up.

“That’s the register of the students taking our next exam. This time, we have your party and Claes’s. Just the two of you.”

“The name’s Loren. The one behind me is Lapis. We’re a party of two.”

From behind Loren, Lapis stealthily slid the documents from the Kaffa guild

across the table. After scanning through them and ensuring their verity, the headmaster tucked them away in a drawer. The quest had now been officially accepted. Once the job was done, the headmaster would return those papers with his seal of approval.

“Your job will entail accompanying the students. We generally don’t permit you to assist, but you can offer advice. They should take full responsibility for themselves while in the labyrinth, and it is not your responsibility if they lose their lives. Don’t worry.”

“You wouldn’t mind if we rescued them before that, would you?”

“Of course not. But if anything happens that requires your intervention, you are to promptly return to the surface. The examinees are expected to keep a map, but you will be handed your own map of the labyrinth in advance.”

The labyrinth had already been used for the same exam several times before, so the map was fairly comprehensive. In case of emergency, they were supposed to use it to return. Otherwise, it was hands-off; it would be impossible to gauge the examinee’s true strength if they received help from their proctors. In other words, the exam was over the moment a proctor determined help was necessary.

“Clearing the fifth floor is enough to pass, but they’re entitled to go as far as they’re able. Of course, the floor they reach will correspond to their grade. The exam only ends when the examinees reach the fifth floor or lose all hope. Any questions?”

“I heard from Claes that we would be permitted entrance to the tenth floor if we managed to reach the ninth. Is that true?” asked Lapis.

“It’s true. To be more precise, you will need to beat the keeper of the ninth floor to reach the stairs to the tenth. The passage from there is usually sealed, but I will hand the students the appropriate permissions to pass through.”

“Is that the only reward? Sounds a bit lackluster.”

“If they manage to bring something back from the tenth floor, I’ll permit that as well.” The headmaster grinned, taking Loren by surprise. The license to retrieve a treasure from the horde of an ancient adventurer sounded genuinely

wondrous. “The same goes for the proctors. If you’re able to take anything, go ahead. However, know that if something happens to you, it’s not our responsibility.”

“Well, I guess we have some outrageous traps to look forward to.”

The way the headmaster put it suggested that there was something on the road back that no student or adventurer could possibly hope to face. Loren wondered if perhaps they would only be allowed to return if they were empty-handed. What would they have to defeat in order to escape to the surface with their loot?

“So with two parties, who’s going to be in charge of who?” Loren looked at Claes, but Claes urged Loren to take his pick first.

As Claes was a graduate adored by the current student body, he was presumably confident that he could take care of anyone he was assigned to. With that in mind, Loren looked through the documents on both parties and placed one of them on the table.

“Please assign this one to us.”

“Very well,” the headmaster nodded. “On what did you base your decision?”

Loren scanned the top page again. “I felt a bit of a connection.”

Still hiding behind Loren’s back, Lapis peeked over his shoulder at the bundle of papers he had selected. As soon as she saw the party leader’s name, she nodded her acceptance.

It read “Ein”—the leader of the kids they’d met at the bar.

Their introductory meeting was over in no time flat. This was largely because they weren’t strangers to begin with. At the bar, Loren had been able to tell the kids were pretty young, but looking at them in broad daylight, he felt rather conflicted about their entirely childlike auras.

“You have an old-looking face after all, Mr. Loren.”

“I’m aware. You don’t need to tell me.”

The truth of the matter was that Loren didn't know his own exact age. If he counted back to the time he'd known how to count, he could surmise he was a little over twenty, but he didn't know the actual answer. No one around him had ever seemed to care, and as a mercenary, Loren had thought the number meaningless. His occupation was one where few ever grew old enough to care about age.

But once he found himself looking at the faces of these young students, he felt strangely decrepit.

"It's all right. You're still young," Lapis said.

"I don't need consolation either. How old are you anyway, Lapis?"

"Oh, Mr. Loren. I'm surprised to hear such a roundabout death wish coming from you."

"Hey, now..."

"Just kidding. I'm just as old as I look."

If so, then she wasn't as outrageously old as demons were known to get. However, this was Lapis making the claim; he didn't know whether to take her at face value.

"We're happy to have you aboard. Thanks for agreeing to be our proctors." Ein, the party's leader, greeted them with excess energy. He was well built, his firm physique draped in chain mail, and his sword and round shield giving him the look of a run-of-the-mill front-line fighter. His short-trimmed blond hair just added to the look.

"Not that we needed one," sniffed Cloud, the brown-haired, flippant-looking boy. He wore a leather breastplate with fewer moving parts than Loren's, and the weapon hanging from his belt was a long, slender blade called an estoc. Loren presumed he was a swordsman who focused on speed.

"Just quit it, Cloud. You're dealing with professional adventurers—they'll be scary if you make them angry." This awfully meek statement came from Al, the boy with the bowl cut. This one wore priest vestments with a long mace dangling from his belt. The design of his robes shared some similarities with Lapis's.

Al professed himself to be an apprentice priest in service to the supreme god, but his flinching demeanor made it hard to believe that he served the supreme being who sat at the summit of the pantheon.

“Thanks for helping me out last night! You really saved me there.” This came from Phem, a girl with an unusual amount of pep in her step. She had short black hair and wore a robe while carrying a wooden staff—a rather orthodox look for a magician. She was indeed a magician, and with her graduation near, she claimed to be able to cast elementary magic once a day.

After the introductions were over, Loren watched the party prepare from afar. He whispered to Lapis, “Do you think they’ll be able to reach the tenth floor?”

They had already brought all their own belongings from the inn, which were split between Loren’s sack and Lapis’s backpack. Loren couldn’t wear a backpack due to the sword already strapped across his back, so he instead had a loose sack dangling from his left hand. On top of this, he had a brand-new, if crude, knife on his left hip.

“You’re able to use a knife, Mr. Loren?” Lapis casually asked, sending the conversation in a completely different direction.

“For what it’s worth. You use them to slit throats when you have to.” He drew the weapon as he said this. It was certainly shaped like a knife, but it was far too long and unwieldy for everyday use. Its blade was as thick as that of an axe.

“That’s practically a shortsword. I’m surprised they had that at the weapon shop.”

“They had it at the one in Kaffa. The guy there guaranteed it was sturdy but said no one was buying it ’cause it looked too unrefined. I got it for ten silver.”

“I would have gotten one for you if you asked.”

“It’s just a side weapon. Only has to cut well enough,” Loren replied, but Lapis huffed discontentedly.

He had coincidentally run into both his coat and sword at a shop in Kaffa—at least, that was the official story. He’d already interrogated the shop owner and established that Lapis had been moving behind the scenes to provide his gear.

She would never admit it aloud, but it was essentially an open secret.

The set had cost Loren—or rather Lapis—thirty gold coins, which had saddled him with a small fortune’s worth of debt. However, he had been more or less certain from the start that both coat and blade were likely worth far more than that. If he’d asked Lapis to procure a side weapon, it was clear as day that she would have found something staggeringly expensive. Perhaps his equipment had come absurdly cheap given its real value, but that didn’t mean he had the leisure to waste money.

“So what are your thoughts?” he asked as they watched the group struggle to pick out their supplies.

“You mean about their skill level? Yes, let’s see. This is going to be difficult.” Lapis’s frank appraisal was rather harsh. “They can most likely make it to the fifth-floor pass line, somehow or another. But I don’t know about anything beyond that.”

The map they had been given displayed the location of traps; it also provided information on the monsters residing on each floor in excruciating detail. Going off that intel, Lapis had calculated the general difficulty of each level.

“Though that’s assuming that the monsters born in this labyrinth are no different from normal monsters.”

“Why would they be different?” Loren asked.

Perhaps it went without saying at this point, but as a former mercenary, Loren had never entered a labyrinth before. He hadn’t known there was a possibility that the monsters in a labyrinth might differ from the ones found elsewhere.

“To put it simply, normal monsters leave corpses when they die. Labyrinth monsters leave only certain parts of their bodies, and the rest gets reabsorbed into the labyrinth.”

“Does that impact their relative strength?”

“It can. It really all depends on the labyrinth’s scale. Don’t let your guard down just because they look familiar,” said Lapis. “However, the labyrinth we’re headed into is used for school exams, so I’m fairly sure they’ll be the same, if not weaker, than our usual fare. If worse comes to worst, we can get rid of

those four, and—”

Talk about a dark turn.

“And then what?” Loren cut her off. “Take a shortcut to the bottom floor before filing a report? I’m not helping you do that.”

“Oh, at least say you’re going to *stop* me. Or do you intend to sit on the sidelines?” she retorted.

Loren turned away and played dumb.

This nonchalant banter would, admittedly, have made for a terrible fuss if Ein or his fellows had caught wind of it.

“On that note, I’m guessing that part of you is on the tenth floor, but why would it be there?” Loren asked. “What’s it doing with the belongings of some three-hundred-year-old adventurer?”

It *had* occurred to him that a demon like Lapis could very well have been walking the earth back then, but if Lapis was to be believed, she hadn’t been born at that time. That still left the question of how her body part had gotten there.

Lapis thought for a moment, choosing her words carefully. “Presumably... My parents secretly snuck in. Either there’s a secret passage somewhere, or it’s the sort of place my parents could easily sneak into.”

She said that, but the academy was the exclusive owner of the labyrinth, and strict security measures protected its entrance. Loren hadn’t heard of any adventurers successfully robbing it either. On the other hand, Lapis’s parents were naturally demons as well, and Loren had no idea what level of security you’d need to keep them out of a place.

“Who are your parents, exactly?”

“Do you want to meet them sometime? I could introduce you.”

Loren could tell that some other meaning lurked behind her smug smile. Still, he decided to answer honestly. “I’d rather not. More importantly, what’s your basis for thinking it’s here?”

For a moment, she looked disappointed; as for his question, however, she

reached out and took his right hand. There seemed to be no logical reason for it, and Loren was a little surprised. Lapis paid him no mind and squeezed, asking, “Mr. Loren, can you feel where your right hand is?”

“Of course, it’s my right hand. It’d be weird if I couldn’t.”

“It’s the same for me. It is a part of me, so I have a vague sense that it’s in the area.”

Was the grip on his hand really comparable to the feeling in a part that had been torn off of her? Loren still didn’t get it. But he could tell it was the sort of sensation no vague thought could really get a handle on, so he accepted it and avoided probing any further.

“Say we’re assuming this is a given. How are we supposed to get down there?”

“I can’t help but think that it would be easiest to just incapacitate those four with *Sleep* and finish our business while they’re out—”

“All right, looks like they’re ready.” Loren cut Lapis off at the pass before she could conceive any more callous stratagems.

Lapis quickly shut her mouth as Ein’s party approached, their bags all in order, psyching each other up for the task ahead of them.

“The pass line’s at floor five, but we have our sights on the tenth floor,” Ein said.

“We can totally do it,” Cloud agreed. “Not a problem.”

“You really think so?” Al murmured.

“Let’s do this thing!” Phem crowed. “We’ve been training and studying for this day.”

Loren was pleasantly surprised to see Ein leading the charge. While Lapis didn’t seem to think they had the skills to reach the bottom floor, they were at the very least aiming for it. In that case, as long as Loren could help them reach their goal, he could also complete Lapis’s objective without resorting to any drastic measures. That seemed far preferable to the various dangerous things that came out of her mouth.

“Let’s hope our advice is enough to get them there,” he said to her.

“That sounds a tad optimistic to me,” said Lapis.

It would have been that much easier if he could have helped them directly, but the students were playing the lead role in this quest, and Loren and Lapis had to act the part of side characters.

“How about we secretly help out a bit to make sure?” Lapis pushed.

“Sounds like we don’t have much of a choice.”

“All right, let’s go.”

On Ein’s order, Loren, Lapis, and the students started off toward the entrance to the labyrinth. The entrance itself was in the school building—to prevent anyone unaffiliated with the academy from getting in. However, keeping the worst-case scenario in mind, Loren warily scanned for traps along the way—just in case the academy was even more gung ho about keeping out intruders than they advertised.

Loren had assumed the entrance to a labyrinth would be a sinister sort of place. That wasn’t the case for the labyrinth they were entering this time. The entrance consisted of an austere, unfussy set of stairs leading down from a room on campus.

This was somewhat of a letdown to Loren, but he reminded himself that the exterior design didn’t necessarily correspond with the level of danger.

That entrance room was where they met up with Claes again. He was, it turned out, leading a group of four girls. While Ange the mage stood behind him, the sour look on her face made clear that she was heartily displeased with the situation. Loren couldn’t help but smile—just a bit.

“Are you going down too?” Claes asked, and Loren nodded.

For some strange reason, the girls following Claes looked at Loren with venom in their eyes, and he had to tilt his head. Sure, Claes was clearly popular—or rather, he seemed to have amassed a fair bit of...affection—but was it really so troubling to them for him to be friendly with another guy?

As Loren puzzled over this, he suddenly recalled the contents of the documents on the examinees that he had seen in the headmaster's office. "This isn't the party I remember."

Not that he recalled the examinees he hadn't picked in detail, but he was sure they hadn't been all girls. What's more, the girls behind Claes all seemed to be sword fighters, and the other party's composition hadn't been so unbalanced.

"The moment we heard Claes would be the proctor, we had that party swap with us," said one of the girls behind Claes. She had an imperious expression and blonde ringlets. She stood in front of Loren with her chest stuck boldly forward, showing no signs of fear, and she spoke as the representative of her group. "How foolish it was of them! Honestly, to think they gave up the opportunity to be proctored by a man they called a prodigy when he attended the academy."

"Who's she?" Loren asked Claes, making no attempt to conceal his preemptive exhaustion with this kid. *I wasn't asking you, girl.*

Claes smiled stiffly. "This is Ms. Parmè Pentatonic. I don't imagine you'd be familiar, but she's the daughter of a count in a nearby state."

"Be grateful, adventurer. Someone of your lowly stature wouldn't usually be permitted to talk to me." The girl called Parmè turned her chest away, looking down her nose at him as best she could, given their height difference.

Without so much as a glance at her, Loren addressed Claes again. "Does peerage give you benefits in this school?"

"Officially, students are all treated equally without consideration to any external factors. However, the exceptionally talented students, and the ones of high birth, do tend to throw their weight around... My apologies." Claes's voice shrunk very slightly as he spoke.

"Why are you apologizing?" Loren sighed. Claes was clearly ashamed of whatever he'd done as a student, but faced with his penitent attitude, Loren couldn't help but think Claes was overdoing it.

"That's right! You needn't apologize to one of his ilk!" said Parmè.

"All right, could you please tamp it down?" Loren said. "Especially if you want

any favors down there.”

Parmè looked ready to lash out, but Claes stopped her with a stern side glance.

On Loren’s end, he didn’t care how much any student shouted at him—it was still better if he didn’t have to deal with this one at all.

That said, he promptly lost interest in that crowd and turned his attention to Ange, who was sulking behind them. “That’s a real face you’re making there.”

“You understand where I’m coming from, don’t you?”

“More or less. But stay like that, and you’ll get Claes all worried. The students won’t take to you either.”

Perhaps Ange didn’t care how the students felt, but when Loren brought up the chance of her distracting Claes, her expression straightened just a bit. There was still a crease on her brow, though, so Loren glanced away.

“Where are the other two?” he asked.

“On strike. We’re the only ones on this job.”

The quest hadn’t stated any requirement for the number of party members required to proctor. Apparently, Claes’s other comrades—Leila and Laure—had determined that they would be unable to withstand the atmosphere and refused to join.

“Then couldn’t you have stayed with them?” he asked.

“And leave Claes alone with those girls?” Waves of outrage rolled off of Ange, as if Loren had said something unbelievable. Loren winced back, overpowered, and tried to make some distance, but Ange came straight at him. “You listen here. Sure, Claes has his looks going for him, and his skills are decent. Thanks to all you’ve done, he’s lost a bit of his arrogance, and he’s mellowed out. But I’m telling you, he still makes moves on girls just as quickly—that part hasn’t improved at all!”

“I don’t remember taking pains to fix that in the first place.”

Loren didn’t exactly *not* know this about Claes—he’d just thought of it as not his problem. Given that Claes had three women in his party, and they all had

feelings for him, Loren had an impression that the kid worked fast. But even if that was the case, it seemed harmless enough—to Loren, at least.

“If I shoved Claes and a party of women into a labyrinth without anyone to keep an eye on him, they’d all have hearts in their eyes by the time they stumbled out!”

“I can’t say I understand.”

“Nine months later, we’d have a flood of girls claiming: *This is your child!*”

Isn’t that going a bit too far? Loren thought. But when he looked at Claes, the man was staring into the middle distance, his face a ghastly pale.



Some of the female students seemed taken aback by Ange's statements, but some among them had reddened cheeks and slight smiles; they plainly weren't entirely put off by the idea.

"I have no choice but to come along and be the preventative."

"That's...rough. Good luck with that."

After offering this uninspired encouragement, Loren approached Claes again, placed a hand on his shoulder, and pulled him aside. "Don't overdo it, okay?"

Claes laughed airlessly. "Err... Thanks for the warning."

Yeah, you put it like that, and you already sound doomed, Loren thought. It would be a sorry sight to see a party annihilated because of some kind of love quadrangle, and Loren could only pray he didn't have to see any of it.

"So who's going down first?" Lapis asked, sweeping in the moment the conversation was over.

The stairs to the labyrinth were in the corner of the room, and they weren't wide enough for everyone to enter side by side. With two parties taking part in the exam, one would have to go first and the other after that.

Does that give one of them an advantage? Loren wondered, but he held his tongue. This was best decided by the examinees.

"I'll concede this right to you," said Parmè. "Do you have any objections?"

"Hold on a second. Don't just decide for us," said Ein.

Negotiations between the two leaders began a bit turbulently, each side adamant that the other should go first.

As Loren wondered what made them so desperate to relinquish the initiative, Lapis whispered, "Neither party has any thieves."

Now he got it. Ein's party consisted of two warriors, a mage, and a priest. Parmè's party—from what he could see—consisted of four warriors. There wasn't a thief in sight.

This being an Adventurer Training Academy, they surely trained thieves as well. That made it strange that they were conveniently absent from both

parties. The critical value of a thief in labyrinth exploration went without saying. Given all the various traps, hidden passages, and locked doors and chests and such, a thief's skill set would be invaluable.

"I can only speculate, but that party of well-to-do lasses has no thieves out of contempt for the occupation. They didn't invite any."

Loren supposed it wouldn't be strange for nobles to see "thief" as a job for lowborn peons. No noble daughter would go out of her way to pick up the skill set. That said, while Loren wasn't well versed in labyrinths, even he realized it was supremely dangerous to enter one without a thief in your party.

"They don't need a lockpicker if they ignore all the chests, and so long as they keep an eye out and hit a long stick against the walls and floors as they go, they should be able to detect traps to a degree." Lapis pointed to one of the girls, who apart from her weapon carried a stick as tall as she was. "As for Mr. Ein's party, they have no one suited to learn the proper skills. I have a feeling they partied up because they were already friends."

"Then they could've invited another friend along. Not like there were any restrictions on party size."

Lapis had explained to him that it was a general adventurer's rule of thumb for one party to consist of four to five members. Any fewer, and you might be unable to react to sudden danger. Any more, and you risked getting in each other's way.

Of course, it was possible to form a party as small as two if efficiency wasn't of the essence, and there was no upper limit either.

"They probably didn't know any thieves well enough. For whatever reason, those four seem rather insular unto themselves."

In short, after forming their inner circle, it had become difficult to invite any outsiders to join them, even when they knew they had a need.

While on a different scale, mercenary companies experienced similar difficulties. After making it through thick and thin with a group of comrades, even when the group's numbers dropped, those already in the group often resisted taking in new recruits. As they were disinclined to recruit new

members, the survivors ended up working harder just to make up for their losses.

“It’s like how those in the countryside despise outsiders,” Lapis said.

“That’s a blunt way to put it.”

“In any case, before they enter the unknown, they both want to send someone else to test the waters.”

Just as Lapis brought that explanation to a close, and Loren snorted in amusement at her conclusion, Ein and Parmè finished their tumultuous debate. Parmè’s face was red with frustration, while Ein looked a little proud of himself.

“On your way now,” Ein said.

“You’d best remember this, peasant. This debt will cost you.”

Parmè ground her teeth, but she had no further objections once it had been decided. She collected the other girls—and Claes, who kept lowering his head, as well as Ange, who seemed displeased by Claes’s hangdog attitude. Soon they were on their way down the stairs.

“But you know,” said Loren, “even if you send them ahead, ain’t it meaningless if you don’t follow the exact same path?”

Lapis shrugged. “They *should* follow the same path, as long as they search the way the school taught them to.”

“What do you mean?”

“I stole a glance at the school’s curriculum on the way here. They apparently teach you to place a hand on the left wall upon entering a labyrinth and to walk along that wall when lost.”

“I’ve heard that method before. Though I hear if you use it, you can never reach the exit if the exit’s in the center.”

Following the outer wall only worked if the exit was on the outer walls. If the stairs were somewhere in the center, or another point that didn’t make contact with those outer walls, the method would prove useless.

“When that happens, they are supposed to map out the full circle and use

that map to search once again.”

“We’ve got a long way to go, then.”

This definitely ain’t a job for impatient mercenaries. Loren stifled a yawn as he watched Ein’s party discuss when they would enter, their map at the ready in front of them.

Chapter 3:

Onset to Arrival

“ALL RIGHT, let’s get going.” Ein finally urged his group down the stairs a considerable time after Parmè’s party had left. While he had sent Parmè’s party ahead to secure his own safety, to a degree, he was devious enough to know not to stick right behind them.

Neither of these decisions were particularly laudable, as far as Loren saw it, but his role was to proctor the exam, not to complain about how it was accomplished.

“That’s not very respectable, is it?” said Lapis, who didn’t care much about their role to begin with. She had a way of blurting out what Loren refused to say, and she eyed the examinees with disfavor. Loren continued to match pace with her just the same. “In the first place, sending a woman ahead to save your own skin must go against *some* code. I’d have docked a substantial number of points, were I in charge of the rubric.”

“We’re adventurers, not knights. Didn’t you once say something about doing anything to survive?” asked Loren. *And I can sympathize with that.*

The battlefield was generally a place where if you survived, you were in the right. It wasn’t as if chivalry was never respected or praised, but if you let chivalry lead you to your death, you’d be a laughingstock.

“Anyway, Lapis, don’t you use whoever you can to obtain knowledge?”

At that, Lapis stared at Loren’s face before folding her arms in thought. “Hm? They might be surprisingly capable then.”

“I’m starting to get anxious about sticking with you, though.”

Loren’s face twitched as he watched her consider it. After a while, Lapis declared that she was joking. Loren decided it was better not to think about whether that was true.

“Either way, it’s probably not gonna go the way they want it to,” he said.

“Why do you think so?” Lapis asked, sounding bemused.

Just then, Ein reached the bottom, pushing open the door to the labyrinth. It opened to a dark corridor, and the road beyond branched left and right after a short, straight path.

“It’s too dark to see anything. Phem, prepare a light.”

“Got it.”

After striking her flint a few times, Phem used the sparks to light her lantern. Only after its light illuminated the walls did Ein and his party finally breathe a sigh of relief.

“All right, let’s move on.”

Ein and Cloud took up the front, with Al and Phem behind them.

The labyrinth corridor was wide enough for two people to walk side by side, and the ceiling was beyond the reach of Phem’s lantern. Even so, Loren could tell exactly how high it was, and he knew he could swing his sword with some room to spare.

“That’s a high ceiling,” Lapis said, looking up as well.

Loren nodded. “I could fight as usual.”

“Oh? Can you see it, Mr. Loren?”

Only then did Loren realize—if Phem’s lantern didn’t reach through the darkness, then his eyes couldn’t possibly have made out the ceiling, shrouded in gloom. But when he looked up, he could clearly see the bare stone.

“I told you, I’ve got good night vision. That’s enough light to vaguely make it out.”

“I see.”

Lapis seemed to completely lose interest after he answered, and while she didn’t bring it up again, Loren was left agitated. He called for Scena, asleep somewhere inside him, and received an immediate response.

<Undead eyes can see through all darkness.>

He’d thought their shared senses only went in one direction, with Scena

feeling what he felt, but it seemed Scena's senses were also reflected in his own organs. To the undead, darkness was always close, and perhaps unsurprisingly, they possessed the ability to detect their prey within it.

As a *Lifeless King*, the highest form of undead, Scena apparently boasted eyesight that saw through dark as if it were day. For Loren, that now meant he could see farther than the lantern's light permitted.

A part of him wished Scena had mentioned this beforehand, but he had his doubts about whether it was worth it to criticize Scena for her good intentions. For now, he offered his thanks.

This exchange carried on as the party proceeded down the corridor until they finally reached the first branching path. If they were to honor the school's teachings, they would go along the left wall. Ein's party was already headed that way without discussion.

"I'm thinking about what Claes said," Loren muttered softly, so only Lapis could hear.

She cocked her head. Given the curriculum she'd perused, the route Ein was headed down was standard practice.

"Sure, Parmè lost the argument, but I bet she's thinking, *Like hell I'm gonna test the waters for that riffraff*. Don't you think?" Loren said.

"That is, well, understandable."

"So I think they went right. Not like following the right wall will screw them."

This method of labyrinth mapping essentially involved consistently sticking to one side or the other; there was no reason the left had to be your side of choice. As long as you kept to the outer walls, it hardly mattered. In that case, foreseeing that Ein's party would go left, Parmè and company would naturally head right to ensure they offered no assistance to their enemy.

"You're not going to tell them?" Lapis asked.

If Ein's party was acting under the assumption that they had secured a bit of safety by sending the other party ahead, then letting them go down the left path might prove fantastically dangerous. A short warning—*Parmè might not*

have gone that way—would have been enough to make them raise their guard, but Loren didn't intend to offer it.

"They never asked," he said. "We're just proctors here. We'll give a bit of advice if they ask for it."

After all, they had only just entered, and he doubted there was anything too lethal on the shallowest levels. It wouldn't be that serious even if their charges didn't notice that Parmè had taken a different route. Even if it got messy, the headmaster had said everything that happened in the labyrinth wasn't ultimately the proctors' responsibility.

"And if they asked for help this early, they'd never reach the last floor," he finished.

"You have a point," Lapis agreed and turned her eyes to the two walking at the lead.

At present, they were proceeding a little fast for comfort, only occasionally touching the tips of their weapons against the walls and floors. They were sure that the other party had triggered any obvious traps in advance. This left their priest and magician chasing after them.

They won't be able to deal with a sudden attack from behind, Loren thought. Then he realized that he and Lapis were the ones actually at the rear, and if there were a surprise attack, they would be the ones dealing with it.

"Are we being used as sturdy meat-shields here?"

Whatever monsters the labyrinth produced, it was difficult to imagine that they would be smart enough to discriminate between targets.

"Perhaps making good use of the proctors is part of the exam?"

"Maybe I'd be a bit more willing to be used if someone told us that in advance."

"Given that headmaster, I cannot deny the possibility that he simply forgot."

Loren thought back on that giant of a man. Wolfe XV definitely hadn't looked like the sort of person who mulled over the fine details. Given his name, the headmaster was presumably descended from the ancient adventurer himself,

but the child of a hero wasn't necessarily a hero as well. And even if he had inherited the hero's power, that didn't mean he could teach anyone else to use it.

"Perhaps we should just consider it part of our paycheck and give up."

"Then we're being paid chump change."

"Yes, we're practically volunteering at this point."

Loren and Lapis continued to whisper as they walked, but there was a reason for this. They had far too much free time.

They were moving a bit fast, but Ein and Cloud remained alert for enemies and traps. Meanwhile, Al and Phem prepared themselves to use blessings and magic at any time, ready to deal with any unforeseen complications. Despite the party's vigilance, the all-important enemies were nowhere to be seen. It was so quiet, in fact, that Loren had to wonder if Parmè's party had actually chosen the left path after all.

"Is it because this is the shallowest floor?" Loren wondered.

"It's ominous when nothing happens at all."

"Is it?"

The lack of monsters had left them bored, but it also meant there was no danger, and that was a good thing so far as Loren was concerned.

But Lapis disagreed. "If this is a labyrinth, even the shallow floors should have spawning points somewhere."

And so long as there were locations where monsters were certain to spawn, no matter how vast the labyrinth, the chances of never encountering a single monster were exceedingly low. They couldn't argue with their reality, however, and Loren hadn't caught a glimpse of a single thing since setting foot in the labyrinth.

"Doesn't that mean we're in luck?" Phem asked, intruding on their conversation.

The other three were too focused on watching their surroundings and moving forward to participate. Only the girl, whose main role was to hold the lantern,

had time to spare.

“I hope it can be explained with luck.”

“You’re a pessimistic lady, you are. Worry like that, and you’re gonna end up looking as old as Mr. Frowny Face beside you.”

Attacked when he least expected it, Loren scratched his head with a conflicted expression while Lapis covered her mouth and turned away. Her shoulders were shaking. He could tell she was laughing, but he was well aware he looked older and couldn’t complain.

“Oh, but, Mister, I happen to like a bit of an older face,” said Phem.

“Pfft.” This sudden change made Lapis do a double take, if for different reasons this time. She then crumpled into a coughing fit.

For his part, Loren continued scratching his head, not knowing what to say.

That had sounded like a compliment, but Phem had still called him old. He wasn’t angry per se, but he felt that offering gratitude was just as wrong. He simply couldn’t find the words.

<Is she an enemy, Mister...?>

For now, he hushed the ice-cold voice in his head and began worrying about whether they could finish this job safely—although his concerns were founded in reasons that had nothing to do with the labyrinth.



They finally encountered their first monster right when they reached the second floor. They had ultimately failed to encounter anything on the first floor and soon came upon the stairs leading down. There, they spotted four goblins in a hut, just a short walk from the entrance to the second floor.

Ein's party swiftly got into formation, and they reacted with a speed that suggested a considerable amount of training. Loren hadn't expected much, but that alone made him consider giving them passing marks.

Compared to that... Loren thought as he watched the goblins ready themselves for these intruders. Not all that long ago, he had gone through hell in an ancient ruin filled with the horrid little creatures. But as long as each side had equal numbers, goblins were just as weak as most of the world thought them to be.

In fact... Loren knit his brow. These goblins seemed even weaker than he had expected. If he hadn't heard that a labyrinth's monsters could be influenced by the scale of the labyrinth, he would have assumed this pack was sickly or otherwise enfeebled.

The goblins clumsily flailed the crude shortswords and spears in their hands. As the party's two vanguards raised a battle cry, Loren knew it was practically over. However, they weren't the first to attack. That prize went to Phem, the magician.

Loren would have chalked the party up for a failure if she had deployed her single use of magic at that moment. But Phem didn't cast, nor did she swing her wooden staff. She had hung her lantern from the latter, after all. Instead, she freed her right hand to throw a dart from her sleeve.

The dart flew with force, stabbing straight into the shoulder of one of the goblins. Unfortunately, its needle wasn't too long. A goblin's skin was thick—about as sturdy as the cheapest leather armor—and a dart with just barely enough power to pierce it couldn't deal much of any damage.

At least, that was what Loren thought. Contrary to his expectations, the goblin clutched its shoulder as it toppled and writhed on the floor.

"All right! It worked!" Phem clenched her fist.

“What a piece of work. She slathered it with poison.” Lapis glanced at Phem with appraising eyes.

Between Phem, who used poison, and Lapis, who immediately realized it was poison, Loren had to wonder who had the nastier mind. His thoughts were dispelled by the clash of blades.

Ein and Cloud had closed in and engaged the remaining goblins—Ein had caught two with his shield while Cloud took on the last one.

Ein’s fighting style was concerningly passive. He concentrated both his shield and sword on defense, and he didn’t seem to have any intention of wounding his foe. However, taking the blows of two goblins meant he was indeed fulfilling his role as a vanguard.

Cloud used his speed to get in as many cuts as he could. His estoc was specialized in thrusting and wasn’t fit to lock blades. For that reason, he slipped through his enemy’s attacks, ensuring that he was the only one dealing damage. In this particular engagement, his goblin opponents were so weak that it was an all-around pitiful sight to behold.

Cloud’s goblin foe completely failed to keep up with his movements. Even so, it desperately used sword and shield to fend off Cloud’s thrusts, attempting to get in a counterstrike. Cloud never closed in too far—he always dodged out of range after getting in an attack, and the goblin swung through empty air.

In Loren’s eyes, it was a waste. Why continuously inflict small wounds on a weak goblin? It was as if Cloud was messing around. If he wasn’t, he was ridiculing his opponent, and it wasn’t great to watch.

“Al! Do it! I have it pinned down! Get it!”

“Ehhh?! It’s still moving!”

“Yes, now make it *stop* moving!”

Holding his mace in both nervous hands, Al approached the first goblin, which Phem had taken out. She stood beyond it, her foot planted on its back to keep it down.

“Hurry up! The poison isn’t that strong!” she urged.

“Ugh... I know...” Half in tears, Al lifted his mace.

The goblin flailed harder as it saw Al raise his weapon, desperately attempting to escape Phem’s foot, but Phem ground her heel down.

“Take this!” Al’s voice was a bit too weak to call a yell as he swung his mace down to crush the goblin’s head. However, he missed his mark, hitting it around the shoulder blades. The dull thud was followed by the goblin’s shrieks of anguish.

“Hyah!” Al tried again, this time hitting the arm that the goblin raised to shield its face. Its broken arm was bent in an uncanny direction.

As the goblin shrieked even more loudly, Al wiped away his sweat and stared, baffled, at the mace in his hands. “Why can’t I hit it?”

Loren could contain himself no longer. “I mean, how the hell are you supposed to hit if you’re swinging with your eyes closed?”

As a proctor, he wasn’t supposed to offer advice when no one asked for it, but at this rate, he got the feeling that Al would eventually end up hitting Phem by mistake. Even if he didn’t, the sight of the goblin being forced to remain on a painful mortal coil was a tad too pathetic to bear.

“But if I keep my eyes open, I’ll have to see what happens when I do hit...”

“Fine, then don’t. But if you do, why’d you even become an adventurer? In the first place—”

Loren was about to wade in and grab the kid when Lapis wrapped her arms around his waist from behind, stopping him from going forward. Al, still bewildered by Loren’s lecture, suddenly remembered that the goblin was still alive and once more held his mace aloft.

“What’re you doing, Lapis?” Loren growled.

“I do understand how you feel, but rein it in for now. You’re overstepping your role, and this is probably where they’re supposed to learn these things.”

“Still...”

“Yes, I didn’t think it would be this terrible either. However, even if they’re taking the graduation exam of an adventurer training academy, that doesn’t

necessarily ensure they're ready to pass it."

Loren's frustration remained fixed on his face until he finally clicked his tongue and lightly placed his palm against Lapis's head to remove her from his waist. He meant to signal that he was fine now, but she wasn't letting go.

"Oi, Lapis."

"Mr. Loren, did you always have such a shockingly slim waist?"

"I'm thicker than you. Don't worry. More importantly, you're saying this is all part of the labyrinth experience?" Loren asked. Lapis released him, apparently not fully understanding his question. "I mean, the goblins here are monsters born from the labyrinth, right?"

"Yes, I don't see any sign that they could have come from the outside."

"Which means the labyrinth created those weakened goblins for the purpose of the exam, right?"

Lapis turned her gaze to Ein and his party.

Ein continued drawing the focus of two goblins, never going on the offense, and carrying on a battle that was essentially a stalemate. Cloud, meanwhile, was still inflicting small cuts on the slow-moving goblin. The goblin that Al and Phem had attempted to take out was thrashing in its struggle to escape, especially after Al's mace missed again. At the same time, Phem was trying to stab another paralyzing dart into its back.

"Mr. Loren, a labyrinth's monsters do vary in strength based on its design, but I've never heard of a labyrinth that deliberately produced *weakened* entities."

"Yeah, well, look at them."

"No, think about it. If it could produce and then weaken a monster, why couldn't it just use less energy to produce a different, naturally weaker monster in the first place? Why would a labyrinth choose the more elaborate process?"

"Don't ask me."

There was no way Loren could hope to understand something Lapis didn't. But as he threw in the towel, so too did Lapis. Nevertheless, she folded her arms and frowned as she watched the party fight.

“If you say they’ve been weakened, they probably have been,” he admitted. “The problem is more the why.”

Just in case, Loren also secretly turned his mind to Scena and asked whether this was her doing. He suspected she could have used her energy drain to yield a similar effect, but she confirmed that she’d done no such thing.

“I simply cannot believe a labyrinth would do something so inefficient,” Lapis insisted. “In which case, I can think of two potential explanations.”

“The first?”

“Something weakened them following their birth.”

“And the second?”

“The system that produced them has suffered a malfunction.”

“You can’t guess which is more likely?”

“I don’t have enough information.”

Whichever it is, there’s definitely something going on here, Loren thought with a sigh. He could already tell this was going to be a pain. If only it *had* been one of Scena’s little tricks. “This reeks of trouble.”

“If I weren’t looking for a part of me, I would be considering turning around and leaving right this instant—although I would also be mulling over the penalties for failing a quest, or the fines for abandoning it halfway.”

“Just for reference, around how much is the fine?”

“Five times the reward. Can you pay that, Mr. Loren?”

“You know how lonely my wallet is.”

Naturally, Loren didn’t have sufficient cash to pay anything like that. He didn’t know what sort of calamity awaited him if he failed to do so, but either way, a grim future was most definitely ahead of him.

“I won’t hold it against you if you slip out on your own,” Loren said. He was under the impression that Lapis had funds enough that the penalty would be little more than a slap on the wrist.

This was probably true, but Lapis smiled cheekily. “You must be joking. I’m the

one who wanted to take this job.”

“Oh, really?”

Loren hadn’t been counting the swings, but by pure coincidence, Al finally got the goblin’s head. That was the final blow—the goblin convulsed one, two, three more times before falling motionless.

Once the life had left them, the monsters of the labyrinth were absorbed into its walls, leaving only a portion of their bodies behind. At least, that was how it was supposed to be. Yet after crumbling away, the goblin left nothing in its wake.

“Huh? What?” Al looked nervously around.

“How strange. I guess they don’t always leave something.” Phem, on the other hand, seemed intrigued by this unprecedented result.

Meanwhile, Cloud finally defeated his opponent and rushed over to Ein to take over one of the two he had been keeping contained. Behind him, the defeated goblin crumbled and melted into the floor, once again leaving nothing to remember it by.

After that drag of a battle with the goblins, they soon found the stairs to the third floor. Again, they encountered no further monsters. The absence of obstacles made clear that something was very wrong. Loren wondered if Ein’s party was feeling anxious as well. On the contrary, they seemed relieved by the lack of combat.

“At this rate, we’ll be at the pass line in no time,” said Ein, and his party members happily nodded.

As far as Loren could tell, if the academy graduated adventurers at this party’s skill level, the probability that they would all be alive a year later was about the same as the probability that he would suddenly learn magic in the next five minutes.

He had been misled by the word *examinee*; once again, he was reminded that the exams weren’t taken solely by those with the skill to pass them.

“They won’t last long,” Lapis mused indifferently, having reached the same conclusion. There was little Loren could do but nod. “Incidentally, have you noticed, Mr. Loren?”

“You mean how there’s no signs of Ringlets?”

Lapis looked a little dissatisfied with his answer—not because he was wrong, but because she had plainly hoped to start the conversation with him asking, *What do you mean?* However, the cause for concern was fairly obvious to him, and he couldn’t always play dumb just to keep up with her antics.

What concerned them were the whereabouts of Parmè’s party, the one Claes was tagging along behind. According to the map the headmaster had given them, each labyrinth floor only had one set of stairs leading down. With so few obstacles, it wouldn’t have been strange if they’d caught up before long.

However, they hadn’t seen so much as a hint of Parmè’s party.

“They seemed to be better at combat, so I’m sure they’re blazing forward even faster than we are.”

“I doubt we passed them.”

Ein’s party had wasted a good chunk of time on the weakened goblins. It was hard to imagine they could have outpaced their competitors.

“The way this is going, don’t you think they’re on the fifth floor by now?” Loren asked.

“Hmmm...” Lapis mumbled to herself, unfolding the map while Ein and the others weren’t looking. “That depends on how skilled *they* are. If they’re about on par with our gaggle, I’d say they’re on the fourth floor, no farther.”

“If you’re wondering about Parmè’s party, they’re the academy’s top swordswomen,” Phem piped up, intruding upon Lapis’s monologue.

As the rest of her comrades walked ahead, she was the only one who fell back to join Loren and Lapis. Her mere proximity seemed to irritate Lapis. Loren hid her grim expression behind his hand—he wanted to try getting some information out of Phem.

He had concluded that his words couldn’t be taken as advice so long as they

had nothing to do with the labyrinth exploration, and thus, he wouldn't be violating the rules by asking. Or so he hoped. "Is that ringlet girl that strong?"

"Incredibly so. The girls in her party are all among the top ten sword fighters of this year's examinees."

"Ain't there a pretty big difference between you and them?"

"Does it feel that way?" Phem laughed, but this was no laughing matter. If her words were to be believed, Parmè was definitely already on the fifth floor or beyond. "We're not nobles, and it's not like we've got any real talent. We're just the oddballs and leftovers."

"Wait, isn't the academy a place for those with talent?" Loren asked. At least, that was what Lapis had said. He looked sideways to see her shaking her head, insisting she hadn't been lying.

"That's generally the case," Phem agreed. "But you know, gather enough people with talent, and you'll still find yourself with the truly incredible and the not so incredible."

I guess so, thought Loren. It was a simple equation—there were degrees of talent, and for everyone who possessed a shocking ability came another who, next to them, could be barely recognized as having any ability at all.

"Sure, the upper crust can cultivate a friendly rivalry all they want. But what if you're just slightly above average and you're put face-to-face with true genius?" Phem asked. "You'd start feeling inferior, wouldn't you?"

"Yeah, I see what you're saying..." Loren muttered.

In a nutshell, while the school branded itself as a place to nurture talented individuals, a portion of its student body wasn't actually talented—or rather, they also accepted students who had no special skills to speak of. While Loren wondered why they would do such a thing, Lapis offered an answer.

"Certain people feel more secure when they know there are people below them," said Lapis. "It's an effective means of boosting confidence in one way but a rather foolish one in others."

Phem laughed again. "It's not so bad. They still teach us, and they train us to

fight.”

Does Claes know about this? Loren wondered—though he concluded that the kid had to be in the dark. If Claes had known, he would’ve been too embarrassed to saddle Loren with a party of predetermined failures.

“And we get financial support from the state too!”

“If they’re supporting you, the school must be taking a handsome cut.”

In order to nurture the actually extraordinary talents, the school also took in students who they expected would never amount to anything. The school was probably taking funds from the state to finance this operation, which meant the headmaster was in on the corruption. That surprised Loren, as the large fellow hadn’t seemed the corruptible sort.

However, Phem denied this hypothesis. “The school’s probably getting something, but the headmaster wouldn’t know.”

“Why? Isn’t he in charge of the place?”

“Other people manage the school. The headmaster is...you know? He’s descended from the adventurer who founded the academy.”

Yeah, I could tell by the name, thought Loren. Then he realized, “Wait, they’re just using his name to hide their scheme?”

“If you think about it, the headmaster is just another hired hand,” Lapis added.

It was as yet unclear if the headmaster was privy to the deal, but Loren got the feeling that he’d be the sort to fight back against the whole thing.

“Anyway, you get the picture. I don’t know what the headmaster thinks about us, but we were never expected to pass this exam,” Phem said.

She seemed content, but Loren couldn’t help but see danger all around. Normally, these students would have failed and been sentenced to either continue their lives as students or quit and choose a different path.

However, for some reason, the labyrinth was practically devoid of monsters. They were only on the third floor, but Loren foresaw the fourth and fifth floors would be similar stories. If that happened, this party would pass without

meriting their victory, and they'd be sent off into the world as supposedly first-rate adventurers.

This would ultimately prove to be a disaster for these kids—and it would likely be even worse for whoever hired them.

"I have a question." Lapis raised her hand. "Is that priest—your Mr. Al—in the same boat?"

"What do you mean?"

"I heard Mr. Al serves the supreme god. The other gods might not be so selective, but not just anyone can serve the supreme."

Strongest in the pantheon, the supreme god was the most exalted deity, he who stood above all others. Anyone who wished to serve him either had to hail from a prestigious lineage or be uniquely talented. Thus, Lapis explained, she couldn't comprehend how a priest of the supreme god could have found his way into a self-admitted failure of a party.

"Al is a bit different. His full name is Alford Veronica, and he's the second son of a noble. Apparently."

Well, if he's a priest and a noble, doesn't that make him pretty impressive? Loren couldn't help but wonder. The way Al handled his mace was downright regrettable, but that wasn't a huge flaw if he could perform his priestly duties.

"Oh, well, Al isn't just the kind of guy who'd befriend commoner dregs like us. He's helped us a ton with his knowledge and blessings. He's really dependable."

"*That* guy?" Loren muttered. Al's general mien was far from what anyone could call reliable, so Loren found this hard to believe.

However, Phem didn't look the least bit like she was joking; she was serious. "I mean, he's a bit of a coward, and sure, he's terrible with weapons."

"I can hear you!" Al sarcastically chimed in from ahead.

Phem paid him no mind. "But he really is reliable. Just look at us—we're only here because Al assured us that we would definitely pass. That if we could clear the fifth floor, the tenth floor wasn't a far-off dream. That's what got us motivated to take the test this year."

“I’ve seen you guys at work—you do all your training, and you focus in class.” Al still sounded as quiet as ever, but he spoke with confidence. “Sure, it doesn’t always work out, but I think it’s totally possible if we combine our strengths.”

The other three nodded, convinced. These students, written off as failures, were doing their best to defy the world.

Upon bearing witness to this scene, Loren whispered to Lapis, who had been spacing out beside him. “So what are their actual chances?”

“Who knows? Perhaps someone will awaken to secret talents along the way. Perhaps one of them is hiding a predilection for blind rampages akin to your own, Mr. Loren. I cannot weigh in on the matter.”

“But there’s also a chance we were right about them.”

“It’s not a bad thing to have hope. Probably.” Lapis sounded as if her heart wasn’t in it—as if she was simply saying these things because the situation called for it.

Loren felt there was no need to put it like that, but at this rate, it seemed the kids would pass regardless of their proctors’ evaluation or their own abilities. They were, after all, waltzing unhindered through their test.

“I see the next stairs!” Ein’s words from the front made the others jog forward.

Watching their backs, Loren couldn’t help but wonder where the hell the third-floor monsters had gone. There was clearly something wrong with the labyrinth, but the party pressed on, refusing to see it. He didn’t even know what part of this problem was most concerning.

Loren’s fears became reality. Without receiving any further insights into what was going on, they proceeded through a monsterless fourth floor and found the stairs to the fifth.

He couldn’t hold it in any longer. “Isn’t this messed up?”

This exploration was supposed to be an exam, but if his internal clock was to be believed, they had reached the pass line in just over half a day. This speed

was abnormal, as was the cause.

Not only had they encountered no more than one group of monsters in the entire labyrinth, they also hadn't come across any traps. With nothing to slow them down, they had simply walked their way to the fifth floor. Of course, such an unimpeded stroll wouldn't take them long at all.

Loren suddenly turned to Lapis, since she had the map. "Hey, are they...ever lost?"

"You've picked up on something rather key, Mr. Loren." As always, Lapis checked the map, making sure none of the others could see her do it. She spoke like an old detective talking to her assistant. "There's something wrong with those children. They occasionally make detours, but...they're almost always taking the shortest route from entrance to exit. As if they know the path."

Loren gazed at the four backs ahead of him. The magician, Phem, was in charge of recording the distances and directions that the party traversed on their map. However, the party leader, Ein, decided their path, though at times Al weighed in.

"Additionally, our map shows the location of traps, but with the route they've chosen, it's strange that they haven't fallen for any of them yet."

"They didn't go off?"

Loren could think of only two reasons why a trap wouldn't activate. First: the trigger mechanisms had failed. Second: someone had disabled them before they passed through. If it was the former, that meant there really was something wrong with the labyrinth. If it was the latter, perhaps they should have been thanking Parmè's party—or the earlier intervention of a third party.

"We can write off the flippant kid."

"I agree. He doesn't seem like the scheming type."

However, the remaining three remained under suspicion. Loren couldn't say if the culprit was plotting something or just cheating, but presumably one of them had information that only a proctor was supposed to know.

"Does the exam end on the fifth floor?" Loren asked.

“No, it’s concluded only once they discover the stairs to the sixth floor. The rest is left up to the examinees’ discretion.”

“I see. Hey, you lot,” Loren called out to the party.

This was less than acceptable behavior for a proctor, but Loren knew it was necessary and that Lapis would turn a blind eye.

“What is it?” Ein doubtfully replied. Despite his large build, crew cut, and generally rugged appearance, his fighting style had long since made clear that he wasn’t aggressive by nature. He did best in either a supportive or defensive role.

“If you find the stairs, the exam’s over, right?”

“Yes, well, for what it’s worth.”

“In that case, would you be willing to withdraw here?”

Loren proposed this seemingly out of nowhere. A look of surprise crossed Ein’s face, and Cloud charged forward in his stead. “Hey, you old bastard, the hell are you—”

“Haven’t any of you noticed? You only encountered monsters once during your entire final exam. Apart from that, you haven’t had to deal with a single trap. Isn’t something strange happening here?”

Cloud lost his initial momentum at these words, and Ein looked away.

While no one wanted to look a gift horse in the mouth, it seemed they had indeed realized something in this stank. They had likely wondered if there was any point in passing this exam at all.

There’s still hope for them yet, Loren thought, only for Al to butt in.

“That doesn’t make sense! This examination was prepared by the school. If something wasn’t working as intended, someone from the academy would have canceled it before it even began.”

“H-he’s right! We were allowed to enter the labyrinth. We’ve got nothing to be embarrassed about!” Cloud declared, having regained a bit of steam.

Loren scratched his head. “This ain’t about being embarrassed. Some errors

are found in advance, others after the fact. Don't you think something's clearly wrong if the labyrinth isn't functioning as intended?"

"It could have been set to this level!"

Loren didn't know if the labyrinth's difficulty *could* be lowered for the exam. The labyrinth was controlled by the school, so perhaps it was possible. However, if the school had really done that, it could no longer be called a training academy. It would only be a production plant for corpses.

"Why would they lower the difficulty for students who are about to become adventurers?"

"Well..." Cloud struggled to find the words.

Al stepped in to help him. "Why, it's possible the school is showing some consideration, boosting our confidence by making sure our exploration is a success."

"Th-that's right! Maybe—"

"If you accept that, then the teachers are all unfathomable idiots," said Loren.

Success was definitely one way to inspire confidence. Loren knew that, and he'd seen it play out time and again in his company when the old hands would scheme up a way to impart confidence and courage to the new recruits.

But Loren had seen how tricky this could be. The second the curtain was pulled back, those who had been deceived lost everything they'd gained. If you carried on in this way, you couldn't ever let those involved realize what had really happened. No mean feat when you had to keep the difficulty of a manufactured problem *just* low enough to guarantee success. You couldn't get away with half-baked measures.

Moreover, their current situation was so blatantly manufactured that it was all but instantly meaningless in the confidence-boosting department.

"Then what do you want us to do?!" Cloud snapped.

"I told you. Turn back. Report the labyrinth's abnormalities to the headmaster. You'll have to retake the exam, but that's better than passing like this."

“Don’t screw with me! You want us to fail after coming this far?!”

“I ain’t screwing around, kid. I’m serious. And if we’re talking about passing, you guys have already failed in my eyes. If I let you walk out of here adventurers, you’d be sleeping in the dirt in less than a year.”

Cloud was once again at a loss for words.

“That’s merely your opinion,” Al said, sticking up for him again. “The future is known only to the gods. You are no god, and I find it hard to believe you can see our future.”

“I can make a pretty good guess.”

“Then it’s entirely possible you’ve guessed incorrectly.”

“Do you think I’m wrong?”

“At the very least, I don’t think anyone asked for your advice.”

Once an examinee accused Loren of infringing on their test experience, there was nothing more he could do. Worst-case scenario, they would report him to the school for interfering in the exam, and he would be burdened with a heavy penalty.

Loren had been unable to help himself from offering critical advice, uncalled for as it was, but perhaps he had stuck his nose where it didn’t belong. Not that he particularly cared.

Of the party, only Phem seemed a bit divided, while Cloud and Ein firmly clung to Al’s defenses.

Loren shrugged. “I see, my bad. I can be a busybody.”

Once Loren backed off, the party immediately headed back down the labyrinth corridor ahead. Ein seemed a bit anxious, while Cloud had a grim look in his eyes, and Al looked as if he had already forgotten the debate.

As Loren slowly trailed after them, Lapis commended his efforts. “At least you tried, Mr. Loren.”

“Sorry about that. It’s all my fault if this ruins our job assessment.”

“Oh, no, not at all. I already had a vague feeling that this quest would be

another failure regardless.”

Another failure. Loren’s face darkened.

Since becoming an adventurer, Loren’s success rate had been achingly low—rather, the only quest he’d ever succeeded had involved herb gathering, and the others had, to a one, ended in failure. If this quest was yet another failure, he wouldn’t be paid, and his reputation would continue on its downward spiral. Those rumors that he was a gigolo leeching off of Lapis would become even more credible.

“I’m not in any position to worry about others, am I?” Loren laughed in self-derision.

<*You can do it, Mister,*> Scena cheered in a corner of his mind.

“It won’t be your fault that we fail, though,” said Lapis.

“Say what you want, but the results speak for themselves. It doesn’t matter as long as it’s treated as a failure.” Loren’s shoulders drooped.

Lapis, meanwhile, was beginning to wonder if Loren was the one in need of a success to boost his confidence. For some reason, whenever Loren took on a job, quests that didn’t sound so difficult suddenly turned into unbelievable ordeals.

Unfortunately, she was certain he would know instantly if she orchestrated a simple task that he would be sure to overcome—and what if that job also exploded and ended in failure? He would lose even more confidence.

In that case, Lapis thought as she walked beside him, *rather than taking simple jobs, we should just take whatever jobs we want. If they happen to fail, I’ll just find whatever reason I can to say it isn’t Mr. Loren’s fault and console him that way. Why, that sounds most effective!*

“I do think the adventurers’ guild has a high opinion of you, though,” she noted. “I’m the one who turns in our quest forms, and each time, they look at me as if in wonder that we’re still alive.”

“That just makes this even worse...” Loren mumbled. “It means I don’t know

when to quit. At best I have enough luck to escape my problems.”

“That’s a skill in and of itself—though if I say that, we’d have to accept that these students not running into monsters comes down to luck as well.”

“If it’s a skill to have the kind of rotten luck that makes me pull the short straw with every single quest, then I—”

“Ah, let’s stop there, Mr. Loren. Nothing good will come of this sort of ruminating.”

While Lapis’s face remained calm, she was internally panicking, desperate to put a stop to this train of thought. She’d thought she could lift Loren’s spirits by offering cheerful topics, but she hadn’t realized just how powerful Loren’s negativity could be. Once his thoughts slanted in that direction, he would see any and everything in a negative light, and it became difficult to offer any assistance.



“More importantly, we must focus on the matter at hand. Do you think they will be satisfied with finding the stairs to the sixth floor?”

“Not happening. They said they were headed to the bottom.”

“Then do you think the sixth floor will be just as devoid of monsters as the previous ones?”

Loren had no answer to that question. Given all they’d been through, it wouldn’t have been strange if the rest of the labyrinth was more of the same. However, something was obviously bothering him. “I don’t know, but...I’m thinking there’s a reason this floor is the pass line. A reason why they don’t force students to go any farther.”

“You may be right... Oh. We’re almost at the stairs. Now, then, their reactions will no doubt be a sight to behold.”

Lapis blinked up at him; Loren was eyeing her as if she’d said something rather villainous.

Meanwhile, Ein’s party finally spotted the stairs to the sixth floor, and their cheers echoed through the labyrinth halls.

Chapter 4:

Pass to Turn

“THIS MEANS we pass, right?” Phem said as she peered down the stairs to the next floor.

“Yeah, but we’re headed for the bottom,” Ein said with a nod, and Cloud nodded as well.

Al smiled at them all, satisfied, while Phem somewhat anxiously glanced at Loren, who was as ever following behind.

“Don’t look at me. I’ve got nothing to say to you,” Loren answered, looking entirely displeased.

“We’re just proctors, after all.” Lapis offered a pure smile, despite her cynical tone.

Ein directed a hostile look at the two of them, then locked eyes with his party members and summoned his resolve. “Is everyone ready? We’re going to reach the bottom, return with the relics of Wolfe, and prove to the school just what we can do.”

“Those damn noble brats who looked down on us’ll be stamping their feet in frustration.”

“We can do it. It would be impossible if any one of us were alone, but we’ve combined our strengths.”

Loren gazed upon this circle of friends, as thoroughly vexed as he had ever been. To be perfectly honest, he was filled with the irresistible urge to insist that they turn back—but after calming down and giving it some thought, he reminded himself that his real business was waiting for him on the last floor. What’s more, according to the headmaster, only the students had permission to access the passage from the ninth floor to the tenth.

Although turning back would have been appropriate advice if he cared about the students’ survival, it was actually more convenient for him if they carried

on.

“May I have a minute?” Lapis intruded on their conversation, for once taking over for Loren. Ein and his party seemed suspicious, but Lapis went on regardless. “I want to know about the permissions for the last floor. Could you tell me who has it, and what sort of thing it is?”

“What’s that got to do with you?” Cloud snapped at her, as was to be expected at this point.

However, his tone was less vitriolic than it had been when he spoke to Loren. As long as she kept her mouth shut, Lapis looked for all the world like a wholesome priest; even if she did speak, she came off more than amicably so long as she kept her schemes to herself. She was, on top of that, quite a looker. It seemed even Cloud didn’t have it in him to growl at her.

“Things will only get more dangerous from here on out,” said Lapis. “That information might prove vital in due time, and I want to know before anything happens.”

“Fine, I’ve got it right here,” Ein answered. He pulled out a silver necklace from beneath his breastplate—a silver chain from which a ring of the same color hung.

“May I see it?”

“Y-yeah. Go ahead.”

With his consent, Lapis approached the defenseless boy, pinched the chain, and brought the ring to rest on her hand. She couldn’t take it off of Ein’s neck, so naturally, that made her slide up close to him. His cheeks turned red as he stared at Loren, his head full of what Loren could only assume were pointless thoughts.

“I see, so this is the key. I get it now; thank you.” After studying the ring for a while, Lapis slipped it back into Ein’s armor, smiled, and bowed.

Ein’s cheeks only turned redder with that gesture, yet Lapis didn’t seem to notice a thing. She was quickly back by Loren’s side.

“A-are we good now? Then let’s get to the sixth floor.” Ein’s flush hadn’t

lessened, and his voice quavered ever so slightly.

There were no objections; Ein and Cloud took the lead down the stairs, no different to any passage that had come before it. They led, however, to a scene the party had never seen before.

“What is...this?” Phem asked no one in particular—in fact, no one in Ein’s party had an answer. Even Loren and Lapis were at a loss for words.

At the end of the stairs was a stone passageway just like the others. The difference lay in the somewhat cloudy, if otherwise transparent, mucus-like ooze splattered across it. What’s more, this ooze seemed to wriggle bit by bit as they stared at it, slowly squirming along the floor and walls.

“How to put it lightly? This is pretty sickening.” Loren didn’t hide his revulsion at the scene, lit by lantern light.

Beside him, Lapis studied the scenery with intense interest. She crouched by the nearest puddle of goop, and after staring a while, stood and declared her conclusion. “Yes, this is a slime.”

“A slime? You mean *that* sort of slime?” Even Loren, who had been raised on the battlefield, had heard of them before. The real creatures occasionally slid out into the open once the battles were over, so he had seen them as well.

Slimes were a sort of indeterminate ooze with seemingly no will or emotion—the simplest and lowest form of monster. They could acquire various traits depending on the environments they lived in, but they moved slowly, had relatively low defense, and died if their core was struck by any random stick. This was what the world at large understood to be true about them, at least.

“*Probably* that sort of slime.”

“Oh, damn... We should get the hell out, then.”

Loren seemed alone in this assessment, as everyone’s eyes gathered on him. Phem looked curious but confused, though her comrades had the look of young men being subjected to the ramblings of an old fool.

“There are a few slimes is all. What are you chickening out for?” Cloud jeered, grinding a lump of goo under his boot.

Being little more than liquid, the slime's fluid body was brought to an anticlimactic end. Its core was destroyed under Cloud's heel, its body left to melt along the labyrinth ground.

"What I'm scared of shouldn't matter to you."

"Hah! If you're scared of a monster this weak, that just goes to show how incapable you are," Cloud mocked.

But Loren wasn't going to play along. "Did you bring a torch, Lapis?"

"Of course I did."

Loren drew his knife from his belt, holding it in his right hand, and he took the torch Lapis offered in his left. Lapis struck a shard of flint to light it, and Loren held it high above his head.

"What's he up to?"

"Don't worry about him. Let's just keep going. The fact that we haven't run into Parmè at all means she's still farther ahead," Ein urged them on.

Cloud nodded, taking his place beside Ein as part of the front line. Then came Phem and Al, and behind them, Lapis whispered to Loren, sounding somewhat impressed.

"I didn't expect you to know a slime's weakness, Mr. Loren."

"They're bad news. Especially because they don't have any thoughts or feelings to get distracted by. They zero in on their prey and nothing else. Sure, they're slow, and they die quickly...but in the right conditions, even a skilled mercenary could bite the dust."

"You have experience, I take it."

"On an old battlefield." Loren's expression turned grim. It took a moment of silence for him to sort through the details. "It was the worst kind of war. Not that there are any good ones out there. I don't know if it was someone's sick excuse for a hobby, but there was a lot of magic involved. Anyway, plenty of us came out dead, ally and enemy alike. We didn't know what to do with all the corpses."

"That's quite something... One theory posits that slimes are life-forms that

emerge in places where mana amasses or is otherwise thrown out of balance. I understand someone conducted an experiment and managed to produce slimes via this method. With magic being thrown around on such a grand scale as a battlefield, the surrounding mana was likely thrown into disarray.”

When water, blood, and corpses were added to this chaos, it had given birth to slimes.

Loren’s experiences on that field had taught him that slimes generally ate anything that was remotely edible. “And as there were so many corpses, someone got the bright idea to just feed them to the slimes.”

“Ah. I’m already seeing where this is headed.”

“Feed ’em and they’ll fatten up—we knew that. We didn’t think they’d also multiply.”

Regardless of how they came into existence, slimes were still life-forms. As they ate, they of course grew, but after growing to a certain extent, a slime split in two. This was how they reproduced.

Once they’d consume the abundance of corpses, the slimes had grown and grown, then split, taken in more, and grown again.

“The slimes covered the entire battlefield, like a tidal wave. It was a nightmare,” Loren muttered.

They’d eaten not only corpses but earth and water—anything they could reach. The slimes grew in number and volume until they swallowed everything and everyone around them, friend or foe.

“A looming wave of jumbled and melting corpses, see. It was coming straight at—”

“You needn’t explain further. What will you do if I actually imagine it?”

“I still see it in my dreams sometimes.”

“I’ll lose my appetite... Not that it matters, I guess. We’ll be having unappetizing preserved rations for dinner either way.”

Lapis refused his explanation with an aggrieved look on her face. It wasn’t as if Loren wanted to tell the story that badly—but he was hoping his experiences

had gotten something across. While Ein's party seemed just as off-put as Lapis was, they didn't look any less eager to push forward.

It might be hopeless, thought Loren.

Lapis drew closer than necessary, nuzzling up to him.

"What?"

"Oh, don't look into it. I simply believe this is, in all likelihood, the safest place to be."

Her argument was understandable, and Loren walked on without asking for any further elaboration.

Granted, to those who didn't know their circumstances, it might have seemed like they were flirting. Ein averted his eyes while Cloud audibly clicked his tongue and glared. Al also turned away, purposefully dismissing them.

Phem alone seemed intrigued, staring at Lapis. "Are you two in a *relationship*?"

"What do you mean, saying it like that?"

"I mean, ah..." Phem's cheeks reddened at the follow-up question.

"Ms. Phem, I won't say you're entirely blind, but you're observing rather a different phenomenon at present," Lapis levelly proclaimed. "If you understood our current situation, then you would realize why I've chosen to stand here and why I've assumed the safest position... Or was that perhaps too difficult to follow?"

"That's...safe, is it?" Phem said. The implication of the word *safe* was that they were currently in danger. However, Phem evidently failed to feel any of the peril Lapis was alluding to.

"Forget about them, Phem! Without you over here holding the lantern, we can't get anywhere. C'mon!" Cloud called her over. While Phem seemed a tad curious about Lapis's warning, she was soon chasing after the rest of her party, lantern swinging ahead.

"Still, it's nothing but slimes all over the place," Al noted. "What do we do?"

“It will take time, but let’s take them out one by one. We should eliminate as many potential threats as possible,” Ein said.

Ein and Al began crushing the slimes on the floor and walls one by one, stepping on them and hitting them with a mace. Cloud personally began piercing slime cores with his sword. Naturally, this slowed the party’s advance considerably.

“They would be completely defenseless if they were attacked now.” Lapis said, as if it were someone else’s problem.

Loren tilted his head. “With so many slimes around, you think there’s something here aiming to attack?”

“Well, I hope there is.” Her tone dropped, and she hung her head, still clinging to Loren.

Slimes were life-forms that ate whatever they could. If they had multiplied to the point that they covered the entirety of a dungeon floor, it was hard to imagine there could be anything left here *but* for slimes.

“Oi, something’s here!”

This train of thought was cut short by Cloud’s shout from the front.

It had fallen at the end of the corridor, just beyond the reach of the lantern light. By some miracle, the slimes had receded around it. It wore leather armor, and its long brown hair lay carelessly tossed about its head. As far as Cloud could tell, it was human.

“It’s one of Parmè’s party members.” Cloud had approached carefully at first, but as he recognized her, he picked up the pace.

It was unclear whether the fallen girl was conscious, but she didn’t react to any of the approaching footsteps.

“H-hey?” Cloud gingerly called out. Still, the girl didn’t move. He turned to his comrades, wondering what to do. They all had the same question, but no one could answer it: Was she alive?

They couldn’t even tell how long she had been there.

Yet with so many slimes around, even if she had somehow been knocked out and fallen here, it was strange that she'd been left alone to be eaten. They had to assume she was dead—not that Cloud could tell just by looking.

“What do we do about this?” he asked.

“R-right.” Ein struggled to respond. He prodded the fallen girl with the tip of his longsword. Despite his timid pokes, she offered no response.

The party exchanged looks—it seemed the girl had met a tragic end. Or so they thought, when the girl's body suddenly began to convulse. Cloud and Ein retreated a few steps, their eyes fixed on the girl, who had somehow turned face-up.

“Whoa!”

Which of them had cried out? Cloud wasn't sure. In any case, they were stuck looking at the girl's face. It was more like a mask made by an uncommonly shoddy craftsman. Its eyelids hung half-open over her eyes, but the eyeballs that should have been behind them were nothing but black holes. Her mouth was open, yet it was impossible to see if her teeth or tongue were still there.

The fact that this collapsed girl had once been the image of a refined noble maiden only made her hollow mouth and eyes all the more unnerving. Worse, even after she had rolled over, her body continued to twitch, and it showed no signs of stopping.

“Wh-what's going on here?!” Cloud demanded, trying to bluff his way through the uncanniness.

As if reacting to his words, the girl vomited something—it spewed not only from her mouth but from her nose and eyes, gurgling from every orifice.

“Is that a slime?” Ein's voice quavered as he stared at the expulsion.

He was right—it was indeed a slime. It had presumably attacked the girl at some point, and after it had taken her life, it had infiltrated her body through every opening, eating her from the inside out.

“Which means...” Cloud turned pale as he realized the girl before him was no more than skin. Not a single shred of flesh or organ remained within her body.

She was simply packed full of slime.

As if in strange resonance with Cloud's thought, the girl's corpse suddenly ruptured and her innards scattered, sloshing outward everywhere. The slime that had eaten her breached back into the outside world.

Its body, which should have been transparent, was dyed a faint red. It couldn't have been long since she died then, if her blood was so fresh—and her flesh. Her half-digested organs jiggled within the slime's interior.

"Urgh..."

Cloud was late to react to this spectacle. He was stunned—immobile. The slime wouldn't pass up this opportunity.

"Cloud, get away!"

Ein hadn't been there from the start, so he barely made it in time. He blocked the slime's pounce with his shield, shoving Cloud behind him—but once it had stuck to the shield, the slime began to envelop it, reaching its viscous body towards Ein.

"Bastard!" Ein swung his shield to shake it off, but the slime wouldn't be dislodged by such a basic maneuver.

Worse, while Ein was focused on shaking it off the shield, he failed to notice that bits of the slime had remained in the girl's body, which stretched, reaching for his leg.

By the time he realized, the slime already had him by the ankle. Simultaneously, the slime on his shield reached his hand, and Ein finally fell into a panic. "S-save me!"

"Ein! Goddammit! Let go of him!" Cloud snapped to his senses, stabbing his estoc at the slime around Ein's leg.

Unfortunately, slimes felt no pain, no matter how they were cut, and they only took damage when their core was crushed. A thrusting weapon was frankly useless against them.

The slime didn't falter no matter how many times Cloud stabbed it, and its body gradually changed color as it digested the boots Ein was wearing. The

other one had begun eating his hand.

“Augh?! It’s like my hand’s on fire!”

In the dead girl’s case, the slime had killed her first and then infiltrated her body to digest her. This time, Ein was putting up more of a fight, and it seemed that instead it would eat through him until it killed him. Soon, Ein’s hand and arm began to melt, festering into red and black as if they had been submerged in powerful acid. He desperately clawed at the slime, screaming. “Al! Do something!”

“But what—”

Cloud turned on Al, having realized his estoc was useless. Neither could he grab at the slime with his bare hands.

However, Al didn’t have the means to remove the slime wrapped around Ein’s arm and leg either.

“Umm, wait, I’ll remember it—the way to deal with slimes is—is—” As the rest of them panicked, Phem fished around in her robe, desperately trying to remember any means she might have to resolve the situation. She glanced pleadingly at Loren.

It wasn’t as if Loren didn’t notice her glance. However, as Phem didn’t say anything, he said nothing in return. He simply watched silently as the slime ensnared Ein, and Cloud and Al panicked around him. After a while, he sighed and pointed at the torch he was holding over his head.

Phem thought hard about what he might mean, and the realization came to her suddenly. She produced a small bottle from her robe and dodged past her panicking comrades. As fast as she could, she splattered the contents of the vial on the corpse that had spat up the slime.

Her bottle contained a slightly viscous, transparent liquid, and she spread it not only on the body but on the slime unfolding from it.

“Ein! Hold your breath!” Phem warned. Immediately after, she slammed her lantern against the corpse. Its shattered glass fragments scattered everywhere, and the flame inside instantly swallowed the dead girl whole, blazing up into a raging inferno.

“Phem?! What are you doing?!”

“If a slime has your comrade, you have to burn it! They said so in class!”

Flames were a highly effective method of dealing with slimes. This varied by species, of course, and in some cases, it wouldn’t work at all, but most slime bodies had a high moisture content, and they had an intense dislike of flame.

Phem had slathered the girl’s body with oil—her lantern fuel, to be precise, which had been processed specifically to burn well. The flame spread rapidly, branching down every liquid trail. Eventually, weakened by flame and pain, its body letting off black smoke and an evil stench, the slime faltered and released Ein.

However, Ein wasn’t unscathed by direct exposure to the heat either. He turned his face away, so he didn’t take in any of the smoke or smell, but his body was burned. The moment he saw the slime falter, he pulled the rest of it from his body, coughing as he sheltered his mangled hand, and stumbled away.

“Are you safe?! Are you all right, Ein?!”

“Hardly! That was terrible.”

“I want to preserve my *Heal* blessing. Can you manage with medicine and bandages?”

Ein had somehow or another avoided the fate of being eaten alive, but he had been left in a state. There were holes in his boots from where the digestion had begun, and unsightly, festering wounds ran down his shield arm. Apart from that, his face and neck had taken damage from Phem’s flames, and he was lightly burned. Al began treating his wounds with ointment—but they had survived.

Lapis had silently watched this unfold from beginning to end. She still clung to Loren as she asked, “How would you rate their performance, Mr. Loren?”

“I’ve hardly got any experience as an adventurer,” Loren replied after some thought, keeping his torch above his head.

“Rate them as a mercenary then.”

“Not the worst, I’d say. Especially when Phem didn’t hesitate to light the fire

as soon as she knew she had to.”

Slimes were resistant to physical attacks. They seemed to have no sense of pain, so they felt nothing when parts of their bodies were crushed or chopped off or minced. It was possible to deal with them physically—so long as you had a way of accurately identifying, reaching, and crushing their core. However, without that, the encounter often ended up as it had with Cloud and Ein.

You wanted to exterminate them speedily in order to ensure it didn’t come to that, and one way by which to do that was fire. If you had a magician with magic aplenty, you could rely on them too. Loren’s mercenary company had been lacking on that front, and whenever they’d encounter slimes without a magician on hand, flames had been their only option.

When a slime had captured one of their comrades, there had been no way to remove it save for burning it, comrade and all. Attempts to break the core might just as well end with cutting and crushing your ally, and any of their open wounds would only help the slime digest them.

Loren had unsheathed his knife and taken up a torch expressly in order to fend off any slime that ensnared him. He would use the knife if he could reach its core and was otherwise prepared to set himself ablaze. So long as they were dealing with slimes, he knew the sword on his back was practically useless.

“Shouldn’t you give up and go home?” Loren suggested as soon as Ein had been bandaged up.

However, Ein shook his head, while Cloud looked at Loren as he would at an enemy. “I said we’re going straight to the bottom!”

“I heard, but what are you gonna do for light? Do you have a spare lantern?”

Cloud looked at the fragments scattered around the burning corpse and slime, and only then did he realize their light had been lost.

Smashing the lantern to light a fire had been an exceedingly crude maneuver, but it had been reasonable given the situation. There had been no time to carefully open the lid and transfer a spark. Loren didn’t believe Phem was in the wrong for slamming her lantern on the floor, but it seemed Cloud thought differently.

“Oi, what do we do? We’ve got a long way to go!” Cloud closed in on Phem with a grim face, and Phem looked to their other comrades with an awkward expression.

“Does anyone...have a spare lantern?” she asked.

“I do. It’s all right, Cloud, we’re still good.” Al lit his spare lantern from the fire feeding on the wretched corpse. The mood lightened once they had secured a source of literal light, but their attention soon shifted back to the dead girl.

“She was left out here alone.”

“The question is whether they turned back or pressed on after... Knowing Parmè, I’m sure she went on.”

“She has Mr. Claes with her, though just as a proctor. Even assuming he didn’t stick his nose where it didn’t belong, yes, I’m sure Parmè pressed on.”

“Then what about us?” Cloud asked.

Ein rubbed his wounded arm as he thought, then declared with confidence, “We keep going. This isn’t enough to make us turn back.”

“Let’s give everyone oil and live coals to deal with the slimes. Be watchful—don’t be careless if we spot Mr. Claes or Parmè.”

“It’s burning really well. We can use it to light the coals.”

The slime that had assaulted them writhed with the corpse, but its movements gradually lessened. Having determined that it would be fine to leave it, the party used the corpse to transfer flames to the coals each had on hand.

“I’ll hold the lantern this time,” Al said. “If this one breaks, we really will have no replacement.”

“Start a fire if you sense danger. Here, Ein, if you’re in pain, lean on my shoulder.”

“I’m fine. This won’t be an issue.”

Ein’s shield would have to be discarded, having been enveloped by a slime and partially digested, then deformed by flames. They would have stripped

equipment off the girl's corpse if they could, but she had been burned, and they couldn't rescue anything useful.

"Phem, mark this spot on the map. I'm sure another slime will eat what's left of her when the flames go out, but we need to report this when we're back aboveground."

"Yeah, got it."

"Then let's keep going."

The party moved on at Ein's command. Loren was about to follow when he realized Lapis was tugging on his clothes. He glanced at her.

"Mr. Loren, I'll leave it to you to find the opportunity."

"Opportunity? Opportunity for what?"

"Oh, various things. For instance, the right opportunity to split off from this party." Even as she casually alluded to abandoning these children, Lapis eyed Ein's back. "You're not planning on following them to the grave, are you?"

"I'm not...but we can't enter the last floor without them."

"That is no longer an issue. Just leave it to me, Mr. Loren," Lapis said with the air of absolute guarantee.

If Lapis was that confident, she definitely had something up her sleeve. But the second she deployed whatever it was, they'd likely be abandoning the students to fulfill their own goal. Lapis had foisted the decision of when to do so onto him, and Loren sighed, thinking over what he ought to do.

Regardless of Loren's thoughts on the matter, Ein's party proceeded on and on.

Either because a slime had been the heart of the first trap to really impede them, or because Ein was seriously injured, they made sure to crush every slime they saw in any remotely troublesome place, even burning them now and then as they traveled forward. It felt like they were barely progressing at all, but onward they went.

The situation only worsened, however. With his injuries, Ein still had the strength to walk on his own, but with his shield abandoned and his arm burned, he was in no condition to fight.

Cloud might have filled in for him, but his estoc was ineffective against slimes, and thus he couldn't fulfill the vanguard role. With Al the priest and Phem the magician taking part in the extermination efforts, they were for now able to continue the search—but this would only be possible so long as they had sufficient oil and coal. Neither was in infinite supply, especially the oil. It was their lantern fuel, which they would still need for the return trip.

Luckily, not every encounter required splattering as much oil as Phem had initially used. Dripping a bit and setting it ablaze was enough to send most slimes fleeing, which let them conserve their supply.

"It's not getting any better," Lapis muttered, now clinging to Loren's back.

Cloud and Ein seemed to be under the impression that Loren and Lapis were shamelessly flirting, uncaring of their audience. They eyed them darkly, but Lapis refused to separate from Loren, which Loren was beginning to find strange. At first, she had evaded all his questions as to why, but with enough persistence, she finally opened up.

"My limbs aren't working entirely as they should," she murmured. She was clinging to Loren to hide this fact.

"Up you get, then," said Loren, encouraging her onto his back.

Lapis's limbs had stopped working once before. It had been a result of a spell that dispersed mana. Consequently, Lapis's mana-powered limbs had been temporarily disabled.

"Is it like before?" he asked.

Lapis shook her head. "It's not that I lack sufficient mana to power them. They're just not *listening* to me, or rather..."

Given that she struggled to find the right words, it was clear that she herself didn't have a clear grasp on the problem.

"I believe I could force them to work in a pinch, so please drop me if there's

an emergency,” she whispered from his back.

Loren personally didn’t want to carry Lapis for long. There was no telling when and where a slime might attack. As their bodies were liquid, slimes could climb practically anything and worm through any crevice. Whether they nestled on the tips of the treetops or in the cracks in the walls, they climbed without thought, lurked, and abruptly sprang upon their victims.

Loren had only ever faced slimes on the battlefield, but even in the midst of fights between humans, he had seen multiple mercenaries and soldiers lose their lives to slimes instead. The creatures might, at any point, drop from treetops or seep through slight gaps in luggage or corpse piles.

In a labyrinth, slimes had their pick of where to hide and wait. They could cling to the ceiling to take their prey by surprise or ooze out of walls. The floors were imperfectly paved too. There was no telling where a slime would emerge next.

Now he had Lapis covering his biggest blind spot, which only made the situation more dangerous. Loren wasn’t exactly delighted.

What’s more, as he shouldered her, the students looked at him even more critically. This did not improve his mood.

“Hey, you’re really not turning back?” Loren asked.

“Shut it, you horny old creep.”

The search continued.

For better or worse, they found the stairs to the seventh floor shortly after running across the corpse of Parmè’s party member. While this relieved the students initially, the feeling dwindled when they found that the only thing waiting for them on the seventh floor was an even greater number of slimes.

“Don’t tell me that the sixth floor onward is all a slime breeding ground?” Loren asked, sounding more than fed up with the countless goop monsters covering every surface.

Phem could hardly contain her surprise as she answered. “It...shouldn’t be. I think...”

“Aren’t we in trouble here? Even if we do make it to the last floor, we won’t have the oil to get back.” Cloud was finally starting to sound anxious.

Al pointed to his own bag. “I still have plenty of oil with me. It’s fine. We should have more than enough for the return trip.”

“Why did you bring so much?”

“It’s not called a labyrinth for nothing. I expected us to get lost, so I brought a good deal more oil than I thought was necessary. Luckily.”

“But the way things are going, the next floor will probably be even worse,” said Ein. “We’ll eventually reach a point where we can’t proceed.”

This sounded perfectly reasonable to Loren, but Al answered again, confident as ever. “I’m sure Parmè has exterminated a fair few ahead of us. We shouldn’t have to kill *every* one of them, in any case.”

“It’s possible she turned back after the death...”

“In that case, wouldn’t we have run into her? We have every reason to believe she pressed on.”

Al said this definitively, and Ein and Cloud exchanged looks, unable to rebut him. After a nod, they continued. Phem eyed their backs anxiously but still chased after them.

Letting them go ahead, Loren followed at a safe distance.

“This doesn’t have anything to do with the part of you we’re looking for, does it?” Loren asked Lapis. Her body twitched on his back, and he looked over his shoulder, wondering if anything had come to mind.

As their eyes met, Lapis shook her head. “I don’t know exactly what part of me is here. But no matter what part it is, it wouldn’t cause something like this. Trust me.”

“Well, it’s not like I suspect you’re up to something. But this has to be abnormal, right?”

“Indeed. If the lower floors are in a similar state, that means half the labyrinth has been overtaken by slimes. I’ve never heard of that happening before.” Lapis paused for a moment and, after a long silence, continued. “Yes, I’ve never

heard of it. How very intriguing.”

“Keep that hunger to yourself. There’s no guarantee we’re getting out of this alive.”

For now, Loren was leaving the slime extermination to Ein’s party, but if something happened to complicate their ability to return to the surface, it would be up to Loren to take charge. Lapis had prepared spare torches, but he doubted that would be enough. The labyrinth was supposed to get more difficult the farther down they went.

“Oh, please, what do you take me for?” Lapis sniffed. “I’m not so selfish that I would prioritize my own curiosity in a situation like this.”

“I’d hope so.”

Nevertheless, Lapis had the dangerous aura of a woman who would gladly bring herself to ruin if that would sate her curiosity. At least, so it felt to Loren. If it came to it, he realized he would have to knock her out or forcefully drag her to safety. He smiled wryly as he realized he hadn’t even considered leaving her behind.

“What’s so funny?” she asked.

“It’s nothing.”

Only a little farther down the path, Scena appeared in his field of vision, flapping her tiny wings.

<Don’t worry, Mister. If anything happens, I’ll use my powers to their fullest to get you to the surface no matter what,> she declared, clenching her fists.

I’m looking forward to it, Loren told her.

Perhaps because he had been distracted, he realized Ein’s party had strayed a fair distance ahead. He sped up, then came to a stop.

“Mr. Loren?” Lapis asked, confused. He didn’t answer her, instead staring intently at his feet.

He had picked up a minute vibration from the floor. While faint, the fact that the stone floor was vibrating enough for him to detect it meant that something was amiss farther down the passageway. He raised his eyes to behold the scene

he least wanted to see.

There, straight ahead, he saw Ein's party running with desperation on their faces; they crushed every slime in their path underfoot as they sprinted full tilt. Worse still was what they were running from—a torrential wave of slimes that stretched from wall to wall, flooding down the passage.



Loren's face froze. Then he made a smart about-face and bolted down the path from which they'd come.

"Oi, you! Proctor! Why are you running ahead of us?!"

"Because I don't wanna die!"

"At least wait until after we're past you!"

"You think I've got the time?!"

It wasn't as if Loren had the means to defeat a number of slimes so great that they filled an entire corridor. He could only wholeheartedly pray the monsters didn't catch up. Until then, he would run as fast as his legs would take him.

He couldn't even try lighting them up with his torch—not only would he have no way to burn slimes in those numbers, but he could already imagine himself being crushed to death beneath the wave.

"Where did you find so many?!" Loren cried out.

"Hell if I know!" Cloud howled from behind. "They just rushed in from farther down the corridor!"

"If you've got time to talk, move your feet!" Phem cried tearfully. "Quick, they'll catch up!"

"This way!" Al ordered.

Then, suddenly, the sound of their flight vanished. Taken aback, Loren glanced behind him, still running. But all he could see was a semi-transparent wall of slime. The students were nowhere to be seen.

"Were they swallowed up?!"

"No, it seems they took a different branch." Lapis had watched from her position on his back and seen the events transpire over her shoulder. Ein's party had taken a detour in an attempt to avoid the wall of slimes.

"Did we lose them, or did they lose us?!"

"Does it matter which?"

"Course it does! There's a huge difference between them randomly losing

track of us and me carelessly losing track of them—the difference between whether we did our job or not!”

“You’re worrying about that *now*?”

“I guess if I’d waited for them, we might’ve been caught...” Loren’s voice descended into a mumble, though his running speed never fell. He maintained their distance from the slime flood.

Eyeing it from his back, Lapis sighed. “Leave those regrets for after we’ve escaped, okay? Then you’ll have all the time in the world.”

“You’re not wrong about that.”

Loren put those thoughts on hold and continued forward, sprinting down the dark corridors at speeds unimaginable from someone carrying another person, their bags, and a large sword. He pushed and pushed, ever at full speed, his step never faltering.

Chapter 5:

Running to the Bottom Floor

AS A RULE, slimes were slow, but there were exceptions. For example, the wall of ooze surging behind them. Mostly, though, slimes made their way through the world at a sticky crawl. They were exceedingly sluggish creatures.

Thus, when faced with a slime-filled labyrinth, painstakingly exterminating every slime one at a time probably wasn't the best strategy. It would be better to simply outrun them or to clear them out all at once—if one had the firepower to do so. At least, Loren was beginning to think so.

He was, after all, going much faster now that they'd been separated from Ein's party. Granted, this was largely because the wave of slimes behind him made moving any more slowly a non-option. He did still flag a bit every time he had to take evasive action—avoiding the tentacles of the ones trying to grab his ankles or dodging the slimes falling from the ceiling—and he always made sure to check corners with his torch before progressing. But even with all that, they were moving much faster.

"Mr. Loren, do you know where you're going?" Lapis asked, glancing over her shoulder to gauge their distance from the flood.

"Nope."

"As I thought..."

The accurate map they had received as proctors was already practically useless. Loren had dashed through a multitude of passages so fast that it was impossible to determine their current location. Once they lost track of their location, their surroundings were rendered into nothing but endless stretches of stone walls, floor, and ceiling, with no landmarks to give them an idea of where they might be.

On top of this, the school's preferred method of navigating via the left wall had been rendered useless. This method only worked when you could be confident that you were touching the outer wall. It was currently impossible to

tell which wall qualified as that.

They were profoundly lost.

“What do you think happened to them?” Loren asked as he ran.

For a moment, Lapis tilted her head, not quite understanding the question. She quickly realized and let out a deep sigh over his neck.

“Oi, stop. That’s ticklish,” Loren grumbled.

“My apologies. I have no interest in those children, nor do I think they will be of any help to us in our current straits.”

There was no guarantee that dodging down a side path had saved them. A portion of the flood might well have split off and followed them down it. Worse, they might have run into another horde of slimes lying in wait. For those reasons, Loren didn’t intend to attempt the same maneuver.

This was, however, not their most pressing predicament.

“More importantly, Mr. Loren, we’ve been running for a while now. Are you all right?”

Loren was weighed down by their equipment, his sword, and Lapis herself. This was a considerable amount, and Lapis clearly feared he would soon be exhausted.

“The battlefield isn’t that forgiving.”

The sound of his footsteps would occasionally change from hard thumps to wet splotches as he crushed slimes underfoot. If he slowed, the slimes he trampled would catch his feet, and if he went too fast, he would slip on their slimy bodies and topple, Lapis and all. But he was neither caught nor did he tumble, and his speed remained steady. Perhaps not every mercenary could move with such precision, but...

“There’s a saying: First to stop running, first to start croaking. The first thing we ever trained to do was run like hell. Even carrying equipment, supplies, and our comrades, if need be. Compared to that, you’re not heavy at all.”

“Yes, about that, Mr. Loren.”

Lapis was about to change the topic when her words were abruptly cut off with a yelp. They were both overtaken by a strange weightlessness, like they were floating. Lapis squirmed in a panic when she realized that Loren had dived headlong into a pitfall trap in their path.

Voluntarily diving into a trap was widely regarded as suicidal, but upon landing, Loren immediately started sprinting again. It seemed it hadn't been designed to be a lethal fall but rather a trap that sent its victims to a lower, deadlier floor.

Lapis sagged against Loren's back, relieved at this outcome, only to freeze again. She had no doubt realized that they were now on the eighth floor.

"You were saying?" Loren asked.

Loren realized that he had taken them into even greater danger, but he maintained his calm. He urged Lapis to return to whatever she had meant to say before the fall.

Unfortunately, the waterfall of slimes cascaded behind them.

Lapis beat Loren about the shoulders. "They're still chasing, Mr. Loren!"

"I guess going to the next floor down wasn't enough to shake them off." He sighed, vexed.

As he picked up speed once again, Lapis brought her lips to his ear. "I was going to say that my arms and legs won't move."

"Out of mana again?"

"No, our surroundings are abundant with mana. Too much so, I'd say."

How did that work? Her limbs needed mana to function, so if there was a lot of mana, shouldn't she have been all set? This didn't seem right to Loren, though admittedly he was neither a magician nor a priest. "What do you mean?"

"Would you understand if I told you that the mana is so thick that they simply cannot function properly?"

It wasn't like that laid out the fine details, but he got the gist. It was always possible to have too much of a good thing. Perhaps this was one of those times.

“Do you know exactly what’s wrong?” he asked.

“I don’t. But if you give me some time, I should be able to retune my limbs, somehow or another.”

“Time, eh?” Loren glanced back.

The tidal wave of slimes had fallen behind, but it was still in pursuit. It didn’t show any signs of slowing either. Whether Lapis had enough time would depend wholly on how far Loren was able to run.

“No one’s watching, in any case. So as long as my hands recover, I can blow some of those slimes away with magic,” Lapis said.

Loren cut her off. “Hold that thought.”

Before she could ask why, a human figure burst forward from a side path just ahead.

“Claes?!”

There was now a figure running parallel to Loren—Claes, holding a robed Ange in a bridal carry.

Between this arrival and the way the slime flood picked up momentum the second Claes joined them, Loren figured out what was up. “You were being chased too?!”

“What do we have here? Didn’t think I’d run into you! What a coincidence!” Claes called.

“Not a welcome one,” Loren groaned.

Evidently, Claes was in the midst of fleeing a problem identical to theirs. He’d emerged into a wider corridor only for his own slime flood to merge with theirs, and now they were all frantically racing in the same direction.

“What happened to your students?” Loren asked.

“I lost sight of them when that thing started chasing us. A slime fell on one of their heads on an upper floor, and we couldn’t save her.”

“Yeah, we ran into her. Her body was filled with slime—took one of our examinees by surprise. Better burn it next time, or you’ll leave your problems

for somebody else.”

“We didn’t have time!”

Ange nodded in panicked agreement, even though she was practically petrified in Claes’s arms. That meant Claes wasn’t trying to shirk the blame—they’d probably had to dodge more slimes falling from above. His party had been so focused on getting away that they had been unable to burn the girl who’d been their tragic sacrifice.

Not that this meant they could write off the trouble it had caused the other party.

“We’ll come back to that later. Claes, do you know where we are?”

“I’m sorry to say that I’ve been concentrating on getting away. Do I look like I’m in any position to check a map?” Claes nodded to Ange in his arms.

“So we’re in the same boat.”

Loren had vaguely suspected this, but he couldn’t help but feel disappointed once it was spelled out to him. Considering that he was in the same situation, Claes probably felt the same way. He couldn’t really be angry at the kid.

“Meaning you’ve got no idea where we’re headed?” Claes asked.

“What, do you?”

“This bites—how do we shake that thing off?!”

The wall of slimes continued to chase them, maintaining a dangerously close distance, neither gaining on nor losing them. If they hadn’t met up with Claes, then their best bet would have been to have Lapis go ham with her magic once she regained control of her arms. But so long as other people could see her, she couldn’t do anything too drastic.

“In the first place, the labyrinth wasn’t like this when I took the exam!” Claes groaned.

“Then what happened?”

“Don’t ask me!”

“For now, we should head to the ninth floor,” Ange said. Her face was a little

red, perhaps as she had her arms wrapped around Claes's neck, but she spoke with confidence. "We're safe if we can make it past the ninth-floor keeper. Labyrinth monsters can't enter its area; it will be a sort of safe zone."

"I see what you mean, Ange, but only the students have the key to get past it," said Claes. "We can take a breather if we beat the keeper, but we'll still be cornered by the slimes."

"Wouldn't that be the same even if we got to the tenth floor?" Loren asked.

"Well, the tenth floor houses Wolfe's treasure hoard, but there's also a transfer gate back to the surface."

"Then what's stopping anyone from stealing the treasure from it?" Loren asked. *Can't they just stuff their pockets and jump into the gate? Even if it's guarded—*

"The thing is, there's a guardian in front of the gate, and the gate isn't active by default. The gate will activate with no trouble if you haven't taken anything, but if you have, you need to defeat the guardian to use it."

"Whatever it is, it won't matter if we can't get there," Ange said, bringing the matter to a close.

"In that case, I have an idea," said Lapis. "Let's head for the tenth floor."

"What kind of idea's going to help us here?"

"I cannot divulge it just yet. However, I will say that there's a chance we'll be saved. For now, let's search for this ninth-floor keeper and think about how to infiltrate the tenth floor."

Claes and Ange exchanged a brief glance but quickly nodded. They had seemingly concluded that they might as well go along with Lapis's proposal, at least until someone had a better idea.

"Then first, we'll have to plan a route to our destination."

"Leave it to me," said Claes. "I've been down here longer than you two. I think I should be able to figure something out."

"Glad to hear it," said Loren. "It'll be a while before we can get away though."

That made the other three look back. They sighed at the sight of the surging semi-transparent wall. Loren and Claes picked up the pace while Lapis and Ange held on tight, taking great care not to get in the way.

Whatever happened next, doing something about the flood of slimes was their top priority. No matter how trained or gifted they were, Loren and Claes were both human, and no human could outrun exhaustion.

Even if they could push on for long periods of time, eternity was a different matter. It was clear that they would eventually run out of strength and be swallowed by the slimes.

“Claes, go swing your sword at them. I’ll hold Ange for you.”

“Are you telling me to die?!”

“Don’t worry. You can do it.”

“Your baseless trust is shady as hell!”

Loren kept urging him forward—who knew, maybe he’d really pull it off. Unfortunately, Claes shut him down; even his *Boost*, which increased his strength and abilities, wasn’t powerful enough to deal with the sheer mass of these slimes.

“You’re surprisingly useless.”

“How could you expect anyone to handle that with a single sword?!”

Screaming only served to expend more stamina.

You’re just shortening the time until the slimes catch up, Loren thought. But he was self-aware enough to know he had been the instigator, so he kept his mouth shut.

On and on, they ran and ran, turning corner after corner. Once they’d run out of straight corridors, they noticed the slime flood had lessened somewhat. They dropped their running speed ever so slightly, and when they next looked back, the slime flood was nowhere to be seen.

“Are we saved?”

“Why? How? No, we should be glad we’re alive...”

It was too anticlimactic; they had been suddenly rescued from peril for no apparent reason. Claes looked back and forth, clearly afraid that this was only the start of something far worse. Loren couldn’t justify the outcome either. He readied himself to deal with whatever was coming.

Then Scena projected herself in his vision. *<Don’t worry, Mister. I took care of them.>*

She looked triumphant, as if hoping to be praised for her work. She had hardly explained a thing, but Loren congratulated her in his head and asked for the details.

<I’ve been using my energy drain on the slimes to weaken and kill them.>

Slimes were thoroughly simple life-forms, but when enough gathered in one place, they could pose a threat to even Loren or Claes—a threat they had, until just now, been experiencing firsthand. Individually, however, they were far less concerning.

Bit by bit, so Lapis wouldn’t notice, Scena had stolen the slimes’ life force, one after another. There had been so many to target that the effects of her efforts hadn’t been immediately apparent. On top of that, Scena had been so wary of Lapis that she had exercised far less power than she otherwise would have.

<I can’t use too much at a time. Ms. Lapis almost noticed me before.>

Neither Loren nor Scena had any idea what Lapis might do if she realized a *Lifeless King’s* astral body was anchored to him. Loren worried that, as a priest, she would feel obligated to eradicate it, though he could also see Lapis treating them as a curious specimen to study and experiment on.

It was entirely possible that she would do something else altogether, but there was no doubt in Loren’s mind that it would be nothing good. Both Loren and Scena therefore took great care not to attract undue attention.

Be careful, Loren reminded her as he tried to play off the situation. “Did they find something else to eat?”

“The only other thing down here is the examinees. We’d have to save them,

then..." Claes said, setting Ange on the ground.

"You want to go back and attract the slimes' attention again?" Loren asked.

Claes had looked about to take off that very instant, and he appeared pretty displeased by Loren's disagreement. He nevertheless seemed to see the sense in Loren's words, and he stayed where he was.

"Then what?" he asked.

"First off, we need to know where we are. You said you'd know if we walked around a bit, right?"

"All right, we'll start with that."

As a proctor, Claes had been supplied with a map. He unfurled it and walked forward, with Loren following behind. There was nothing wrong with Ange's body—she hadn't been carried due to injury—so once the threat was gone, she could walk on her own feet. Lapis, however, couldn't exactly explain the cause of her own situation and remained on Loren's back.

"Was your priest injured?"

"Don't worry about me. I'm here because I like it." Lapis dismissed Claes's concern.

Loren helplessly smiled as if to back up her claim. For whatever reason, this made Ange glare at Claes enviously—perhaps because of all they'd heard about Claes being rather frivolous with women.

Claes forced a smile, picking up the pace to avoid her eyes.

A short while later, he stuck his finger on a point on the map. "We're right here."

Claes identified it so fast that Loren had some misgivings. While he had indeed told Claes to figure out their location, he hadn't assumed it would be easy, or even possible. However, after taking a few turns using Claes's indication as their basis, it soon became clear that he was right. Loren stared at him with honest-to-goodness amazement.

"It's nothing special," Claes insisted. "I came down here all the time as a student."

“This is the first time I’ve ever been glad to be working with you.”

“That wasn’t a compliment, was it?”

Point being that, in Loren’s eyes, Claes apparently hadn’t done anything particularly compliment-worthy before.

In any case, so long as they knew their location, the map would show them the way to the stairs. They no longer had to worry about getting lost.

It wasn’t as if the missing examinees didn’t weigh on their minds, but they knew they would risk far more by searching for them. For now, their best bet was to return to the surface and explain the situation to the headmaster. They started off toward the stairs.

Or so they were just about to, when Claes came to a sudden stop. He cupped his hand over his ear and focused. Ange didn’t seem to know what he was doing, but Loren and Lapis had picked up the sounds as well.

“Did you hear that?” Claes asked.

“Sounds like a person...” Loren muttered. “We’re the only people who are supposed to be down here, right?”

“Yeah, so if it’s a human, it’s probably a student. So...”

“You want to check on ’em, right? Got it, you focus on the map.”

Claes was fundamentally a good person. He grew angry at everything that even looked like wrongdoing, and he couldn’t bear to be cruel to those who adored him. Of course, he was a bit faithless as a man, given his willingness to lay hands on his adorers, but as long as Ange handled that somehow or another, he would one day become quite the individual.

Though Claes wanted to escape the labyrinth as soon as the rest of them, having heard a voice that might potentially belong to a student, he couldn’t abandon them.

“You’re a lifesaver,” he said to Loren as they went. “I had my hands full as it was, just protecting Ange.”

“I can barely manage myself and Lapis. Don’t expect too much.”

“Still, if you and I work together, we should be able to recover one or two more.”

“Oi, that still means you intend to abandon the other five or six.”

“Yes, well...”

Claes mulled over Loren’s words, but even as the one who’d said it, Loren was beginning to think it was inevitable that a few of the kids would be left behind. He would help any students he could, but he didn’t see the reason in risking his own life to save them.

“We’ll get back to the rest. First, let’s check on this one...”

It was difficult work, tracking the origin of a sound in the labyrinth. Any noise bounced endlessly off the walls. Moreover, the whole place had been structured to function as a maze. There was no telling when a sound came from a crack beyond a wall or from another direction entirely.

Even so, they moved forward, relying on the fragmentary sobs, and somehow or another, they managed to pin down the source. In the end, they found a girl, up to her armpits in a transparent wall, half in tears as she struggled to break free. Her blonde ringlets were in disarray, and tentacles were reaching toward her, attempting to pull what was left of her exposed body into the wall.

While she struggled as much as she could, with nothing to grab on to, her efforts were ultimately futile. Slowly, inevitably, she would eventually be pulled in.

“Parmè!”

Parmè’s resigned face, sloppy with tears and snot, lit up the moment Claes called to her. But she quickly shook her head. “You can’t, Claes! Forget about me and run!”

“Do you think I could do that?!”

“I’m already done for. The slime has gotten this far—there’s no escape for me. It’s begun to digest me already... If you must offer me any last compassion, burn us together!”

“That’s...”

When a slime had eaten too much for a victim to be saved, burning them together was a mercy. It was far better than letting them suffer the pains of being melted alive until they ultimately died of suffocation. But Claes lacked the resolve to set her alight when she was still conscious and lucid.

“If you won’t do that for me, then please leave me. I don’t want you to see the slime swallow me whole.” Parmè wailed and pleaded, presumably picturing her own unsightly demise.

Unfortunately, Claes, being who he was, couldn’t willingly leave her to her fate. He stepped forward, hoping to pull her out, but the transparent slime wall reached its feelers toward him too.

“Ugh, I can’t even get close.”

“Oi, Claes, look after Lapis for me,” said Loren.

Even if Lapis couldn’t move properly, he suspected she was still able to stand. He lowered Lapis, handed her the torch, and tapped Claes on the shoulder—then strode over to the wall in which Parmè was lodged.

Naturally, the feelers reached out to him as they had with Claes, but Loren let them grab him, not even attempting to dodge. He stretched, reached—and grabbed Parmè by the scruff of her neck as she stared at him in a daze.

“Eh? Umm, sir...?”

“Hup!” Pouring all his strength into his arms, Loren forcefully tore the girl free. He heard ripping and tearing as he did, but he paid the sounds no mind as he tossed Parmè’s body behind him, toward Claes. With the same calm, he tore the slime feelers off his arms one by one and returned to the group.

“I knew you had to be strong, swinging that huge sword around...but you really are unbelievable,” said Claes.

“Anyone could do that if they trained hard enough.”

Claes shook his head as if to say, *Yeah, I don’t think so.*

Loren had to wonder if he had the right of it.

Either way, Claes was utterly relieved to have one student saved, even as Parmè let out a shrill cry, falling to her knees.

Their heads snapped toward her. What they saw was Parmè collapsed on the floor, using both hands to conceal her chest, her face bright red and teary. She was more than half-naked—she was barely wearing anything at all.



Claes and Loren turned back to the wall, where they saw the torn scraps of Parmè's ruined clothes and undergarments swaying in the slime, and they finally understood what had happened.

"So that's where that ripping sound came from..."

"Well, they were almost completely dissolved, so of course they wouldn't hold up."

Then they turned to their female counterparts.

As if to say "nope!" Lapis shoved the lit torch at Loren while Ange chucked her staff at Claes. Claes took the staff to the face, falling to his knees, while Loren just barely managed to catch the torch. Dutifully turning their backs to the three women, they began to burn down the wall.

Although she had been saved, Parmè sobbed and covered her face for a while more. It took a bit of consoling from Ange and Lapis, but she eventually regained her composure.

During that time, Claes raised his face again to see if she was all right, only to be silenced by Ange's tightly clenched fist. Loren meekly devoted himself to the monotonous work of burning the slime with the light of the torch.

Once Parmè was stable, Ange produced a light blanket from her bags and wrapped it around her. Lapis checked her chemical burns and wounds. Knowing she had been trapped by a creature composed of strong acid, Lapis had been prepared to treat serious injuries. However, while Parmè's burns weren't light enough to be optimistic, neither were they serious enough to warrant pessimism.

"There's nothing too serious, but the burns extend over nearly her entire body. Mr. Loren, may I use a *Heal* on her?" Lapis asked. She had determined that the injuries would definitely leave scars if left alone. She clearly found the thought of letting such a young girl be so dreadfully scarred rather pitiful, and Loren readily nodded.

"Go ahead, I don't care."

“Are you sure?”

For adventurers in a labyrinth—any adventurers at all, really—it was no exaggeration to say that a priest’s *Heal* blessing could be a matter of life and death. Given that, Claes seemed hesitant about this decision to use one of its limited uses on Parmè.

“Yeah, it’s probably a bad move from a combat perspective,” Loren agreed.

Parmè had lost all her equipment; she could no longer be counted as a combatant, and worse, she was practically a hindrance. Loren could see why someone would question the choice to treat wounds that didn’t seem to pose a threat to her life.

“She’s planning to become an adventurer too. I’m sure she has the resolve to bear scars,” muttered Claes.

“Maybe so. But it’s fine.” Loren placed a hand on his shoulder as if to say “Don’t think so hard about it.”

Claes let it go.

Nearby, Lapis readied herself to deploy her blessing. “O god of knowledge, would it kill you to sift through some of that stupidly expansive knowledge base of yours to pick out an appropriate method for treating this girl?”

“That’s not a real prayer, is it?!”

“Prayers have no definitive form,” Lapis said matter-of-factly as she touched Parmè’s body.

The blessing quickly took effect, healing the parts of Parmè’s body that had been eaten away by the slime. In fact, Parmè’s skin was even beginning to look healthier than it had before.

“Is it just me, or was that prayer more effective than nearly any I’ve seen before?” Ange muttered, sweat beading her brow. It was as if she was struggling to comprehend what she was witnessing.

“Salvation comes to those who believe,” Lapis intoned.

“So what’s the actual story?” Claes asked, but it wasn’t as if Loren had the answer.

“Like I know. Don’t ask me,” he grumbled. *Maybe it’s because demons pack more punch in general.*

At the same time, he couldn’t guarantee that the way Lapis worded her prayer had nothing to do with it.

“We can think about that later,” he said. “Now that Ringlets can move, we should get going. Not a single good thing will come of loitering around here.”

“I’m...sorry for the trouble.” Parmè hung her head. She had lost her arrogance from before.

However, that excess humility wouldn’t be good for morale. Loren tried to offset it with a joke. “Are you gonna parade around naked with a blanket?”

“I-I must graciously accept what I’ve been given.”

He had expected her to snap back, but she simply went along with it. If anything, her face reddened again. Loren was starting to fear he’d made it even worse when Lapis deftly sent him a lifeboat.

“Ange and I could at least offer some undergarments.”

“It’s an emergency, after all. I’ll give you whatever fits.”

Adventurers tended to pack as lightly as possible. They were expected to be in the field for long periods of time, and when sent off to hunt or explore, they generally carried only the bare essentials. All the same, even adventurers knew to pack spare undergarments, and Lapis and Ange were no exception.

Some might have wondered why anyone would waste the space, but an adventurer’s job generally entailed injury or mucking through filth. Sullied undergarments could worsen wounds or lead to illness. Those in the trade had learned this by experience.

While they often didn’t have the space to pack full changes of clothes, it was common sense to at least have replacements for the cloth that most directly touched one’s body.

“I have a spare set of boots you can borrow too,” said Ange.

Magicians didn’t have much in the way of heavy equipment, so they were often able to carry more supplies. This was true for Ange, who had packed

boots, expecting her current pair might be ruined by a trap.

“For the top...mine will be a bit too loose. Ms. Ange’s look just right for you.”

“Grr...”

“As for the bottom...hmm? Ms. Ange’s will slip right off of you. There’s no helping it. You can have some of mine.”

“This doesn’t make any sense!”

“And on top of that... Mr. Loren, lend me a shirt.”

“You got it.”

Given Parmè’s height, Loren’s shirts were long enough to reach around halfway down her thighs. She wore a blanket over that, and when Lapis handed her a torch, she even had a role to play while she couldn’t participate in combat.

Parmè lowered her head. “I really am grateful to all of you. I will find some way to repay you...”

“Leave it for when we’re on the surface. We still don’t know if we’ll make it.” Loren tried to sound as businesslike as possible. If he gave her hope and they failed, that would make the subsequent despair even worse for her. He didn’t know what lay ahead of them, and he couldn’t let her assume she was safe.

“Parmè, do you know what happened to your peers?”

“I’m sorry, Claes. I had my hands full getting away. By the time I realized it, a slime had caught me. I don’t know where the others are.”

For a moment, Claes looked disappointed, but he swiftly regained his calm. Parmè was scrunching herself up apologetically, and he patted her on the head to reassure her.

“Claes...” Parmè’s cheeks flushed.

Ange angrily cleared her throat.

Loren had been absentmindedly watching this when Lapis came up beside him, holding the labyrinth map.

“Feeling a bit wistful?” she asked.

“You gotta be kidding me. That stuff’s just not for me. Don’t see what’s so good about it anyway.”

“That sounds like you, Mr. Loren. Incidentally, will we be heading straight for the ninth-floor keeper?”

Reuniting with Parmè had been an unforeseen complication. While they now had someone they needed to protect, Loren didn’t think it would impact their search too greatly. In fact, if anything, they were in an even bigger hurry to get to the surface, though they would still likely have to defeat the tenth floor’s guardian.

“Claes, Ange, you two protect Parmè. Lapis and I will deal with the enemies.”

“That’s not—no, you have a point,” Claes conceded. “Got it, leave her to us.”

First, they would need to find the keeper that guarded the exit from the ninth floor. Loren declared that he would handle it alone. Claes put up another brief objection, but after thinking it over, he relented.

He’s become pretty perceptive, Loren thought as he lined up with Lapis, who was slowly regaining control of her limbs, and walked at the fore.

“So, here we are...”

Not long after they rescued Parmè, they reached their destination. The only enemies they encountered along the way were slimes, and as they dodged and burned them, the party reached the location on the map where the keeper was said to be. Nothing awaited them there save for a motionless stone doll, both its hands and knees pressed against the floor.

It would have been taller than Loren if it were standing, but something must have happened. It showed no external signs of injury, yet neither did it show any signs of moving.

“Is this supposed to be the keeper?” Loren asked Claes, seeing as he’d been here before.

Claes nodded. “It’s a stone golem that the school made. But I didn’t expect it to be out of service.”

“Is it strong?” Loren asked, wanting to be sure.

Claes, with his knowledge of this specific labyrinth, and Lapis, with her abundant knowledge about everything in general, nodded at practically the same time.

“It’s weaker than a metal golem, but a stone golem is still a formidable foe. It’s no easy task to put one out of commission.”

“Good news for us, though. The question is: Who did it?”

They were about to enter the tenth floor without fighting anything to get there. However, *someone* must have done this to the golem, and whoever it was couldn’t have turned back here, satisfied with their handiwork. It was very likely they had gone on to the tenth floor. In that case, it was highly possible that their party would run into them.

“There’s barely a scratch on its surface.” Claes inspected the golem. “I recall it having a self-repair function. If someone managed to do enough damage to knock it out, it shouldn’t still look this good.”

“Then how’d they take it out?”

Even magic would have left burn marks or caused fragments to fleck off.

“If they went at it fair and square, there’s a blessing that causes damage without inflicting wounds,” said Claes.

“Are you talking about *Force*? That’s one of the few offensive blessings.” While Lapis half-confirmed his hypothesis, she shook her head. “*Force* is pure impact, and it rarely leaves wounds. However, it’s only an elementary blessing, and its output is feeble. Do you think a parlor trick like that could take out a stone golem?”

“Maybe not...”

“It might have worked if it were performed by a high-ranking priest. But why would a high-ranking priest be here? And why did they defeat the keeper?”

“I couldn’t tell you.”

They had too little information and no basis on which to make any decisions.

“What if it wasn’t fair and square?” Lapis asked Claes. “What means could they use?”

“I’d hate to think this was it, but the golem does have an abort key—it’s a password that changes every month... Naturally, the professors know it. Perhaps someone could have bought it off one of them.”

That would be a clear instance of cheating, hence why Claes would have preferred to dismiss the possibility. However, given the evidence before them, they needed to take it into consideration.

“Whatever it is, we have to go down and see,” said Loren.

“You’re not wrong about that.”

“Then let’s get going. Everyone, be prepared. Don’t let yourself be surprised, no matter what comes out.”

Beyond the unmoving stone golem, there was a door in the stone wall. Knowing it had to be the entrance to the tenth floor, Loren sent a signal to Lapis. She approached, turned the door’s knobs, pushed, then pulled, but it was all to no avail.

Having confirmed it was tightly sealed, Lapis placed her palm on the surface and muttered something under her breath.

Chapter 6:

An End to a Hunt

THE DOOR TO THE final floor unlocked, swinging open with nothing but a touch from Lapis and a couple of murmured words. It was so unsatisfying that Loren had to wonder if it had ever been sealed at all.

“What did you just do?” Claes asked, wide-eyed and baffled. Unlike Loren, his astonishment was on full display.

At least his reaction made clear that the door *had* been properly sealed and that Lapis had done what would usually be considered impossible. Loren realized belatedly that perhaps she shouldn’t have let them see what she was up to. But even as he glanced worriedly at her, Lapis shrugged.

“I reproduced the mana wavelength to dispel the seal. I’d handled the key before, so it was simple enough.”

Claes backed off, apparently convinced that this sounded technical enough.

However, Claes was a swordsman. Ange the magician stared in open confusion. “Huh? Hah?”

Theoretically, Ange was supposed to be this party’s mana specialist, and if Ange thought this situation warranted questioning, Loren worried that their companions were about to get acutely suspicious.

But Lapis had an answer for this too. “There was a certain bandit who often came to confess at the church where I was trained. He was in fact a kind fellow, and when he heard I was becoming an adventurer, he taught me the technique in secret. It just goes to show—even if you have a magic lock, you shouldn’t feel too secure. There’s hardly anything a good thief can’t obtain.”

This explanation did lessen Ange’s suspicious squint. Thievery was outside her field of expertise, and she couldn’t outright deny the possibility that Lapis was speaking truth. Either way, no wise person questioned the abilities of someone who had performed a task they themselves were incapable of accomplishing.

“Was that story true?” Loren whispered to Lapis once things had settled down.

“It *is* true that some thieves know how to dispel magic locks,” Lapis replied in hushed tones. “However, the flow of information went the other way around—we were the ones doing the teaching.”

By *we*, she likely didn’t mean priests of the god of knowledge. A demon like Lapis must have disseminated the technique.

So they didn’t just develop this no-good technique; they shared it with thieves, of all people, thought Loren. He was furthermore concerned that this experience had raised the bar for any other priests of the god of knowledge whom Claes and Ange might meet in the future.

“Now, then, the door is open. Standing around here won’t do us any good, so how about we venture to the bottom floor?” Lapis urged the party on, making clear that this was the end of the matter.

The stairs to the tenth floor were a little longer than the prior flights, but there were no other noteworthy differences. They reached the bottom without issue. As for why the stairs were longer, well, this became apparent the moment Loren set foot on the tenth floor.

Unlike the ones before it, the tenth floor was not laid out like a maze. It consisted entirely of a single vast, open space. Here and there, the space was decorated with display cases, each packed to the brim with various bits and pieces of equipment.

The ceiling wasn’t just high; it was also equipped with some sort of light source, which offered excellent visibility across the board.

Parmè propped her torch against the wall as she let out a longing sigh. “So these are the relics of Wolfe...”

The items preserved in the cases all seemed to be of considerable value. The less valuable ones, however, didn’t receive this royal treatment. These were strewn haphazardly about, some of them piled in a mountain by the wall. Even those comparatively worthless items gave off a fair bit of mana and glimmered with silver, gold, and gemstones. One glance made clear that they were

fabulously valuable.

“I haven’t been here since I graduated. It’s awe-inspiring, no matter how many times I see it.” Claes gazed around nostalgically.

Seeing as Claes had apparently been a genuine honor student, Loren was a bit interested to learn what had happened on his prior visit. “Did you take anything last time you were here?”

“No, I avoided combat with the guardian and returned aboveground empty-handed. Didn’t feel like putting my comrades in danger.”

Claes smiled as he glanced at Ange, whose cheeks reddened as her eyes glazed. Loren and Lapis clicked their tongues and pointedly looked away. Only Parmè seemed spellbound, eyeing Claes and Ange’s moment somewhat enviously.

“I didn’t ask about that,” said Loren.

“Well, you kinda did,” Claes said.

“Well, forget about it then! You see our surprise visitors anywhere?”

The tenth floor was terrifically large. What’s more, the shelves interrupted what would have otherwise been a clear field of vision. It was entirely possible that someone was hiding somewhere. Moreover, all the mana-enchanted items made it hard to pick up any presences. Loren knew it was no time to drop his guard.

“I’m expecting an ambush or two,” said Lapis.

The state of the ninth floor’s keeper indicated that someone had entered the tenth floor before them. Whoever it was, they were likely one of the examinees, and there was a high chance that they had, in some way, managed to cheat.

If they had gone that far, then they had definitely planned a way to outmaneuver the proctors—either by devising a way to stall them or worse. But despite their suspicions, nothing had yet emerged to confront them.

“Isn’t it better for us if nothing shows?” Claes asked.

“You’re far too naïve, dear Claes,” Lapis sighed. Claes frowned, displeased,

unaware of what he could have done wrong. “If nothing’s here, then the prior guests have already finished their business. They’ll get away with whatever they’re up to without us ever figuring out what they were scheming.”

“That...might be true.”

“On top of that, if they were our examinees, they must know that we’ve worked out that they cheated. They’ll have run away by the time we reach the surface. Although, so far as our responsibilities as proctors goes, I suppose it’s not an issue if they get away.”

They would have done their job so long as they reported the facts to the school. The rest could be left up to the academy. It would, all in all, be far less effort for them if no one was waiting. This much was true.

“Lapis, have you forgotten why we’re here?”

“Far from it. I’m searching for it now.”

As Loren and the others scanned the area for enemies, Lapis was searching for her body part—the reason for their participation in the first place.

The only trouble was that, whether the part they were looking for was an arm, an eye, or a leg randomly lying around somewhere, Loren didn’t know how exactly they were going to explain it to the others.

Lapis glanced at him as if to say “Oh, don’t worry, worst case, I’ll give them all a little nap”—and then her eyes stopped on one of the display cases.

The cases had been constructed to protect the valuables within them, yet one shelf seemed to hold nothing but a lone colorless gem offhandedly placed upon it.

Lapis approached it casually. The display case rose to around her eye level. When she scooped up the gem, she lifted it up to the light, closed one eye, and peered into it.

“Lapis, umm...” Claes hesitated. “I don’t want to interrupt you, but I don’t think this is the time for that.”

“You have a point,” Lapis conceded and returned the gem to its original position—or so she made it seem, but Loren didn’t miss the moment when she

covertly slipped it into her sleeve.

“Is that it?” he asked her.

“Yes, I’m glad my father made it so easy to carry around.”

“Which is it?”

“My left arm. Not the best, but not the worst, I suppose.”

By what means had her left arm taken the shape of a clear gemstone? What would need to be done to return it to its original form? Loren hadn’t the slightest idea, but Lapis seemed neither confused nor bothered, so he decided it wasn’t a problem.

“Won’t the guardian come for us if you take that?”

“This isn’t one of Wolfe’s treasures. It should be fine.”

If the guardian was meant to prevent anyone from taking one of *Wolfe’s* belongings, Lapis insisted it wouldn’t react if she was simply reclaiming a piece of *her* body. Therefore, they wouldn’t involve Claes and the others in any special danger and would be able to escape easily enough.

Then let’s get out of here, thought Loren. He scanned the area for the exit. Unfortunately, that was when he realized he didn’t even know where the entrance was.

“The entrance disappeared?”

“I-It sealed itself off the moment we came in!” Parmè said, having apparently seen it happen.

Everyone exchanged looks. It made sense, given any thought. If the entrance remained open, any intrepid relic-thief would be able to avoid fighting the guardian as easy as anything. All they would have to do would be to come down, pick their treasure, and wander back out the way they’d come. They wouldn’t even need to fight the ninth-floor keeper a second time, and they would avoid the gate guardian wholesale. The entrance was sealed to ensure the guardian controlled the only exit.

“Oh, right. I think that was the way it was before. Maybe.”

“You forgot?” Loren snapped, whapping the back of his hand against Claes’s chest.

Claes collapsed, clutching his breast, while Ange and Parmè panicked as they dragged him to his feet. Loren rolled his eyes, searching out the location of the guardian and the exit.

It took a bit of time, but he finally located a spot where the display cases and the treasures cut off—a wide, open space, beyond which stood a door. He couldn’t see anywhere else that looked the part, meaning the transfer gate likely lay beyond that opening.

Just before Loren called to the others and started toward the door, he noticed four silhouettes standing before it. Then he heard the sound of something flying, slicing through the wind.

Unconsciously drawing the sword on his back, Loren whipped it out in front of himself. Something hard hit its broadside.

“What was that?!” The sound had caught Claes’s attention.

As Claes drew his longsword, Loren brought his own sword to his shoulder and retrieved the projectile he had deflected with his blade.

“A dart.”

“You’re here early.” The familiar voice came from a member of Ein’s party, whom Loren had last seen running from the wave of slimes—specifically, it came from Al, the priest.

However, the attack had come from the girl beside him, who grinned with a second dart held between her thumb and index finger.

“You could have saved us the trouble if you’d just dropped out along the way,” said Al.

“How do you want me to interpret this?” Loren asked. The needle of the dart he held glistened with a thin, liquid coating. It was probably slathered in poison, and there was little room to misinterpret after someone had thrown it at you.

“That was a warning. Would you be so kind as to not get in our way until we have completed our objective?” Al asked.

To Al's left and his right, Ein and Cloud readied their weapons. For a moment, Loren assumed they were all in cahoots, but upon closer inspection, something was wrong with the fighters' faces. Their eyes were unfocused.

"Don't tell me..."

"Yes, I cast *Hypno* on them—they make great pawns," Phem answered in Al's place. Suddenly, the dart in her hand disappeared and she instead held a roll of paper, which she tossed in the air. "*Fire Bullet*."

The paper let off a brilliant light in midair and then faded into a red orb of flames that barreled toward him.

Loren cut it down with his blade as Lapis warned, "Be careful! They're using scrolls to compensate for their limited magic uses."

"What are they thinking?" Loren snarled.

Scrolls were invaluable; magic could be imbued into paper, so anyone—not only a magician—could use it. When deployed, these scrolls cast the power of the magic inscribed upon them. But there weren't many in circulation, and they sold for a pretty penny.

"Oh, I've merely done whatever was necessary to fulfill my goal," Al laughed. His face no longer resembled that of the meek priest they had journeyed with.

"Care to explain?" Loren asked.

Al slowly tilted his head. "Oh, I don't know. I've still so much to do, and..."

Al's eyes turned away from Loren. Claes had been gradually closing in, but he stopped when Al laid eyes on him.

"Our school is full of geniuses, so I'm sure droning on will just put me at a disadvantage," Al finished.

"That's no reason to leave us in the dark. We're still your proctors, for what it's worth." Even as Loren said these things, he measured the distance between himself and the boy—was he near enough to close in and cut Al down before he did anything?



The answer, at the moment, was a resounding *no*. With Phem ready to rain down scroll-powered hell, and Ein and Cloud standing by, blades drawn, neither Loren nor Claes had a clear shot at Al.

“Say we return to the surface now,” said Loren. “What are we supposed to tell the headmaster if we don’t know what the hell you’re up to?”

“You still think you’re going to return? Well, that’s not my problem.” Al seemed astounded by Loren’s ignorance, but he also apparently felt the need to justify himself, when given the opportunity. “It’s nothing special. I am of noble blood, but I’m second-born. Even if I took up an adventuring career, I’d never amount to anything. Don’t you agree?”

“I think that’s up to you, really.” The way Loren saw it, whether an adventurer achieved anything of note had nothing to do with their lineage. It did depend on talent, he couldn’t deny that. But he saw no reason why the second son of a noble couldn’t succeed in life.

“Maybe I wouldn’t be doomed if I had a talent like Claes over there.”

“We all have our own way of looking at things, so I won’t say you’re wrong. But get to the point.”

“Luckily, I had the intellect to become a priest, and when I left home, I managed to make off with several interesting documents. I went through the papers, hoping to find anything useful, when I came across an intriguing bit of information on the Wolfe Adventurer Training Academy. You are aware of Wolfe’s achievements, I assume?”

“More or less,” Loren hardly remembered any of the history Claes had regaled them with during his school tour. Having considered the information rather useless, Loren had neglected to listen. If he’d known it would come to this, he would have paid a bit more attention.

“Wolfe had numerous accomplishments, but one among them caught my attention,” Al went on. “They say he sealed a dark god—and that seal should be somewhere around here.”

“A dark god?” Loren knit his brow; that sounded shady at best. He vaguely remembered something like that coming up somewhere in Claes’s rambling.

“Right...something about exploring ruins and dragon slaying or whatever.”

“You weren’t listening, were you?” Claes’s shoulders sagged, but Loren wasn’t going to waste time consoling him, not now.

“I am and always have been a priest to the supreme god. But say I were to revive a god no one else believed in. Say I were to become *his* priest—what then?”

“Huh?”

“Wouldn’t I become that god’s high priest? His greatest follower?” Al sounded mighty proud of himself for landing on this notion.

Loren, meanwhile, had no idea how he was supposed to react. He took his eyes off this self-indulgent monologue, his gaze pleading. He was looking to Lapis—and everyone else, for that matter—for an ounce of logic.

The way Al’s life was going, serving the god he served, he would end up just like any other priest, forgotten in the crowd of those like himself. Therefore, he sought a new path. This much Loren understood.

However, how did you get from there to reviving some dark god in order to become its high priest? This idea toed the line between sense and nonsense, and Loren hadn’t the slightest idea what to do about it.

“Lapis,” he said. “Tag in.”

“I don’t want to, Mr. Loren,” said Lapis, regarding him with a dire look. “That exchange made clear to me that he isn’t someone I can reason with. Please don’t dump your problems on me.”

Loren gave up on that angle. He’d thought Lapis, who never spared any effort to acquire more knowledge, might be willing to step in, but she clearly intended to leave the negotiations to Loren.

“Ahem, one more thing.” Loren scratched his head, not having much of a choice. He turned from Al to Phem, who was smiling impishly. “What are *you* doing over there?”

“Well, I mean, I’ve got no real talent for magic. If I graduate like I am and become an adventurer, the best I can hope for is to be picked up by some third-

rate party and ordered around for the rest of my life. In that case, I thought it might be nicer to bet on Al, seeing as he's here making a name for himself and all."

"This is a *dark god* we're talking about. You sure you're gonna come out of this okay?"

"Mmm, well, he promised to pay me, and it's not like the other gods have anything *against* the one sealed here. I looked into the matter—briefly, albeit—and I didn't find a single church with anything to say about whatever it was that sleeps beneath Wolfe Academy. And if this powerful entity were one that other gods bore grudges against, then wouldn't it be strange if it didn't appear in any of their scriptures? So I'm thinking it's nothing too special."

"If the god's not that great, what's the good in serving it?"

"Ah, you may be right there." Phem seemed taken aback, as if she had only just realized that.

The rest of Loren's party looked at her wearily, while Loren exuded the air of a man tired of dealing with this shit.

Nevertheless, Al's expression remained triumphant. "I've already located the seal."

"What?"

This story of some dark god's forgotten seal reeked of exaggeration, if not total fabrication. If Al hadn't already found it, Loren wouldn't even have had to be the skeptic he was to consider it little better than a fairy tale.

However, each motion buoyed by confidence, Al reverently produced something from the pocket of his vestments. It was a box around the size of the palm of his hand, gleaming with metallic luster, etched with complex patterns across its surface.

Al held it up as if it were an offering to a god above. "This is the container of the god sealed by Wolfe."

"Must be a pretty shoddy god, then."

Sure, the patterns were intricate, but it didn't have any ornamentation—no

gems or silver or gold. The box itself was metal, but it didn't shine as a precious metal would. Forced to guess, Loren would have said it was iron.

In other words, it was the sort of thing any blacksmith could make for a handful of coins, yet Al seemed convinced. Loren wondered how serious he could possibly be, but just in case, he raised his guard, taking a stance with his drawn sword beside him.

"If we assume the box is real..." At last, Lapis opened her mouth. Loren hoped she would take over talking the kid down—but instead, she bowled him over. "Then, and this is pure conjecture, perhaps it's connected to why the labyrinth isn't producing any of its normal monsters and is rather filled with slimes."

"As expected of a priest to the god of knowledge." Al nodded. "You're probably right."

Loren got the feeling that the bar had once again been raised for the god of knowledge's other priests, but that was beside the point at the moment.

Lapis's hypothesis sent a shock through the party.

"What do you mean, Lapis?" Claes asked.

"Slimes manifest when the mana in an area is overabundant or in disarray. Don't you think both of these things might happen if something called a dark god were about to awaken?"

"Th-then the labyrinth's current state..." Ange stammered.

Lapis nodded. "Yes, the cause could very well be the dark god sealed in that box over there. Its awakening has caused a massive outbreak of slimes and upset the labyrinth's internal systems."

"But...Al didn't get here until just now," Claes pointed out.

Normally, the labyrinth was controlled by the school. The door to the final floor was sealed so that no one could get past it. No matter how much Al had plotted to awaken this dark god, it was hard to imagine he could have interacted with it until he reached it.

Lapis's answer to this wasn't an answer at all. "This is probably a coincidence."

“Huh?”

“I’m saying it’s a coincidence. Or, well, if something like the dark god’s will existed, you could say this was inevitable, and I wouldn’t be able to deny it.”

“It is the will of the dark god,” Al plainly declared.

“Very well, then let’s just say it was inevitable,” Lapis conceded.

The party stared at Lapis, not knowing whether to be shocked or fed up at this point. For now, she continued her explanation.

“In short, we have that future high priest’s plot to awaken the dark god, and we have the dark god’s awakening, which is tampering with the labyrinth. We must either consider this confluence to be a complete coincidence, or...the will of the dark god has made their simultaneity inevitable.”

“But either way, he’s got nothing to do with this,” Loren said, to make sure.

Lapis nodded.

“The dark god feels my devotion and yearns to waken in turn. How could you call this anything but a result of my devotion?!”

Al was fixated on the idea that this was meant to be, but to everyone else, it just seemed like an unfortunate coincidence. What’s more, this coincidence had already killed at least one student. They could no longer write it off as youthful overambition. However, they didn’t necessarily have to take out Al and Phem. Neither had really *done* anything so far.

“What do we do about this?” Loren asked.

“Well, it would be appropriate to capture him and turn him in to the school,” said Claes, though he didn’t sound too confident.

“Then let’s do it already.”

“Do you think a mere adventurer can catch me?” Al crowed.

As Loren stepped forward, Ein and Cloud once again blocked him with their weapons. Behind them, Phem had taken out another scroll to keep him in check. If he wanted to do anything about Al, he needed to get past all these obstacles first.

“If I can just awaken the god before you reach me...” Al couldn’t imagine that a handful of adventurers were a threat as long as he could undo the seal while Ein and Cloud held them back.

However, all his hopes would be for naught if he couldn’t undo the seal. And that was one thing about which he could not yet be certain.

The documents he had taken from his home had not included the method to release the seal. However, the seal had grown loose enough to influence the labyrinth, and so he was certain it would take only one more push.

Al poured his faith into the box in his hand—when two dull thuds sounded in front of him.

Al raised his eyes from the box. What had happened?

Ein and Cloud had spun and toppled to the floor. He swallowed his breath. Loren had thrust the tip of his sword toward Phem, stopping it at the tip of her nose before she could deploy a scroll.

Loren narrowed his eyes at Al. His voice wasn’t loud, but it was cold. “Give yourself up, or I’ll make mincemeat out of you.”

Al wanted to ignore that simple threat, but the murderous intent underlying it was too real to deny. He swallowed as he watched Phem drop her scroll and feebly teeter into a crouch.

Al’s hands had lost their strength. The box fell from his fingers and bounced over the stone floor with a shrill clang. He soon found himself following Phem’s example, collapsing under the weight of Loren’s words.

“Do you think that’s settled?” Claes asked Loren, seeing as Al and Phem had lost the will to fight.

Loren shrugged without offering a reply. Of course, he knew how to intimidate people, but he likely owed this newfound ability to incapacitate them with the pressure of his will to Scena. The girl was proudly sticking out her chest in the corner of his eyes. Otherwise, it was hard to think that these soon-to-be adventurers had lost their will to fight after a mere glare.

“For now, let’s tie them up with a bit of rope. We wouldn’t want them

running rampant again.”

“All of them, right?” There was pity in Claes’s eyes as he looked at Ein and Cloud.

Those two didn’t seem to be in on this scheme. They had been manipulated and then knocked out by Loren. Objectively, they had been treated abysmally.

Even so, Claes agreed that they had to be tied up. Neither Lapis nor Ange knew how far the *Hypno* spell would maintain its power over the boys, so they needed to be rendered powerless before they regained consciousness.

“All of them,” Loren confirmed. “It’s unfortunate, but they mismanaged their comrades. Just keep telling yourself that.”

“Got it.” Claes nodded. He took the rope Ange had retrieved from her bags and started by binding Phem and Al, as they were still awake.

“What are we going to do now?” Lapis asked Loren as they watched Claes work.

“What do you mean, *what*? We use that transfer gate whatnot to return to the surface.”

“But what do we do about *that*?”

Loren followed Lapis’s gaze, and his expression stiffened upon landing on the object of her interest. He found himself looking at the box Al had dropped.

It had been little more than a metal box in Al’s hands, and it had been left on the floor. Now, however, the patterns on its surface emitted a sinister purple light.

“Hey, now... Don’t tell me...”

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to tell you.”

They had established that the labyrinth’s abnormalities and Al’s plan had nothing to do with each other. Consequently, this meant that tying up Al would do absolutely nothing to resolve the dark god situation.

“We did all that, and it’s still waking up?!”

“We came at the wrong time.” In spite of Loren’s panic, Lapis was horribly

blasé. But her general mood had no bearing on whether they could survive this predicament.

“Wh-what’s happening?!” Parmè cried in dismay.

The light from the box grew more and more intense. It let off lightning flashes of purple, covering the entire room. No one could possibly call this remotely normal.

“Ooh, god has revived to save me from my captivity!” Al squirmed like a bagworm, overcome with emotion.

“Claes, whack him good,” Loren ordered.

Claes begrudgingly delivered a chop to the back of Al’s head. The boy slumped momentarily, but he immediately recovered, pushed past Claes, and inched his way toward the glowing box.

“Give me your strength, o, dark god!”

“Shut up and sleep.” Loren irritably sent his heel into Al’s head. The blow came with a heavy thud, and this time, it properly knocked him out. Al slumped, convulsed, and was at last rendered immobile.

Everyone apart from Loren feared he was dead, but Loren merely kicked Al’s unmoving body to the sidelines and faced the box once more. “Seriously, what do we do about this?”

“I’m not sure there’s anything we can do,” Lapis said, resigned.

After a moment of thought, Loren spoke again—as if he had had a brilliant idea. “How about we leave and pretend we didn’t see anything?”

“Looks like it’s a bit late for that,” Lapis said, staring intently at the box. In fact, Lapis seemed genuinely pleased. The rest of the party looked by turns disheartened and dismayed. “Something’s about to come out.”

“Can’t say I didn’t see it coming.”

Ever since leaving the mercenary gig, Loren’s life had been nothing but a stream of bad luck. It was high time he recognized his own chronic misfortune—there was no way playing dumb would ever have worked out for him.

“Here it comes. Everyone, try to stay conscious.”

If they took all they’d heard as a given, this was an entity great enough to be called a dark god. Who knew what would happen in the moment they witnessed such a being manifest in the physical realm?

Just as everyone braced themselves, the box on the floor let off a conspicuously stronger flash. It was bright enough to scorch the eyes, and Loren couldn’t resist covering his face, though he made sure the box never left his sight. Its outline fell to pieces. Gradually, the light increased in volume, taking on a completely new form. Loren could only stand there and watch.

Eventually, the light died down, and what stood before them was a young-looking man. He had sleepy eyes and bedraggled hair, and he wore the sort of clothing one might find on any citizen of any town. Loren’s attention was drawn first and foremost to his eyes, which were strikingly purple.

“Good grief. Where am I now?” The man scratched his head and his back, his sleepy gaze shifting this way and that.

Loren adjusted his sword and glanced at Lapis. She intuited what he was trying to say and shook her head, confirming his suspicion. Purple eyes indicated that rather than a god, they had landed themselves a demon.

Loren didn’t know whether to be relieved because a demon had to be easier to deal with or to be aggrieved that he had run into a demon in the first place. Worse, from Lapis’s reaction, the fellow seemed to be a complete stranger.

“No answer? Well, whatever. Guess I’ll go find a bed.” Stifling a yawn, the man turned his back to them when they had failed to muster a response.

Finally, Loren managed, “Who are you?”

The man opened his mouth to answer. Then shut, opened, and shut it again. Eventually, he sat on the spot and said, “Answering that’s going to be a pain.”

“Are you the dark god sealed by an adventurer called Wolfe?”

Given all they’d seen thus far, that couldn’t be far from the truth. But Loren asked again, needing to know.

The man shifted until he was lying flat on his back. “Well, let me think. I’ve

been called the god of sloth before. I think. Yeah, back then, there were so, so many people out to kill me. A real bother, I'd say."

"So you really are a dark god?"

"Who can say? Does it matter? I'm fine as long as I've got a place to sleep." The man rolled over until he was looking at Loren. "I remember that Wolfe guy. Yes. He said I could sleep in peace if he sealed me, so I let him. Why am I out here again?"

"That's probably because the seal degraded over time," Lapis muttered. "There's no such thing as an everlasting seal. You've been contained for hundreds of years now, so the bindings came loose."

"Oh, damn. It's been that long already? Then Wolfe must be dead now." The man lifted himself into a cross-legged position. "Which means it must have changed a lot up there. It may be fun to look around a bit. Troublesome as that sounds."

"How about quietly letting yourself be resealed here?" Loren proposed, though he knew the likelihood that this would work was slim.

As expected, the man shook his head. "I was thinking a seal wasn't so bad if I could sleep. I'm sorry to say, it wasn't nearly as comfy in there as I'd hoped. You just can't beat a nice, fluffy bed."

"I can't allow a dark god to escape on my watch!" Claes declared, his longsword at the ready. Beside him, Ange had the tip of her staff locked on the man; she was already preparing to cast a spell.

The man glanced at the two of them, his eyes screaming that this was more trouble than it was worth. Then he shifted his gaze to Loren, who still hadn't moved, and Lapis, who stood tense in his shadow. "What about you two?"

"I don't know," said Loren. "If possible, I'd like to settle this peacefully."

"What if I told you that wasn't gonna happen?"

"Then—"

"Enough. Hearing your answer would be a pain."

Hey, you're the one who asked! Loren thought.

The man, however, ignored him; he placed his index finger on the floor in front of his crossed legs and began writing something out in small, slick movements.

Before anyone could figure out what he was doing, Claes made his move. His legs had been enhanced by his *Boost*, allowing him to close the distance in the blink of an eye. He swung the sword right at the man's neck while the man was still writing.

Everyone expected a spray of blood and a flying head. However, reality and imagination often differ. Claes's sword halted the moment it touched the man's unguarded throat.

"What?!"

"Your technique's decent, but your weapon's a dud. You couldn't cut my nails with a blade that dull."

While he was shocked to have failed, Claes jumped back to regain himself. The man did not follow. He continued writing on the floor, and once he was done, he lifted his index finger once more.

"I'll leave a little something to keep you busy. Have fun. If the time comes, let's meet aga... No, let's not..."



His body began to sink into the floor—but he had summoned something just as he made his escape. The ground he had written on suddenly burst with light. Simultaneously, they all found themselves frozen, unable to chase after him.

“You go on about this and that—how about you start by telling us your name?” Loren snarled. He knew that wouldn’t stop the man.

Indeed, the man continued slipping farther and farther into the ground, but he turned his sleepy eyes toward Loren, and he got a few words in before his mouth was gone too:

“Dark God of Sloth, Downer Acedia. I have an awful feeling we’ll meet again someday.”

And with that, he completely disappeared.

Precisely at that time, as if rising to replace him, an undulating jet-black mass around the height of an adult emerged from the floor.

“Slimes again!”

I’ve had enough of them already, Loren grumbled as the massive black slime began to shuffle toward them. Its approach was slow, as to be expected, and they were able to back off pretty quickly. Along the way, they passed Al—who had been knocked out by Loren’s foot—and Phem, who was conscious but tied up. They also passed Ein and Cloud, who were lying on the floor, out cold. They dragged all four out of the way of the slime.

Despite the countless delectable items littering the shelves, the slime paid them no mind, creeping on a beeline toward Loren.

“Can we burn it?” Loren couldn’t think of anything more effective.

“Fire’s no good here,” Claes warned. “You’ll end up burning the shelves and relics. But I won’t stop you if you intend to pay for them.”

“Like hell I’m digging myself any further into debt.”

Some of the magic tools might have been able to protect themselves, but these were interspersed with books and paintings with no special properties. How much of that would burn if he lit a flame in here?

Naturally, the cost for whatever was lost would likely fall to Loren, and Lapis would end up being the one paying. The amount of debt on his shoulders would skyrocket.

“Let’s burn it, Mr. Loren. By all means.”

“Lapis...”

Lapis’s eyes were downright sparkling. The moment she encountered a method by which to increase Loren’s debt—and with barely any effort on her part!—she was tugging on his sleeve, egging him on. Loren’s shoulders drooped, and he pushed Lapis toward the slime.

For a moment, Lapis didn’t know what was happening, and she quickly ducked behind Loren again. “What are you doing?!”

“Shut up. If you want me to burn it, go let it eat you!”

“I don’t want to! Who exactly benefits from seeing me covered in fluids and tenta—would *you* benefit, Mr. Loren?” Lapis looked suddenly meek, her tone dropping.

However, upon seeing Loren’s bewildered face, she summoned her resolve and clenched her fist to her chest.

“You’re always getting the short end of the stick, Mr. Loren. If I can do something to offer you the slightest benefit, then I, Lapis, inadequate as I may be, am prepared to be covered in tentacles and slime. Onward!”

“Argh, just get back!”

Loren grabbed her by the collar and tossed her behind him as the slime attempted to grab her. He sliced through the grasping feeler with his sword.

“I’m jealous that you get along so well, but are we going to just keep on retreating like this?!” Claes asked. He wasn’t holding his weapon; in his need to save the unconscious students, he was desperately dragging them with him, leaving no time to swing a sword.

Ange and Parmè were helping, but it took two of them to carry one person, and moving four unconscious bodies was proving to be more difficult than it looked.

“If we get all the way to the entrance, can’t we just circle around and go past it?”

Though the slime was large, it wasn’t big enough to completely block their way around it. There was plenty of space to its left and right. Loren figured it would be no problem to dodge around it.

Claes shook his head and gestured at his burden. “Carrying them?”

Now tied up, Al and his cohorts were more than a little heavy. Loren and Claes could each carry one of them and maintain full speed, but there were four in total. If Loren were to carry two, his speed would drop, and that would increase the probability of him getting grabbed.

That said, if Lapis, Ange, or Parmè tried to help out, even one of the students would slow them down considerably, and they definitely wouldn’t be as nimble as they’d have to be to dodge the slime.

“But if we want to fight, just look at this.” Loren cut down another feeler reaching out for him.

He could cut it all he wanted, but the slime’s feelers were practically liquid, and while his sword scattered the length of the one he cut, whatever splashed out was soon reabsorbed by the main body, ensuring it took no real damage.

“This is never gonna end.”

“Can you do anything with your magic, Ms. Ange?”

Ange, who was slowly dragging Ein, shook her head without looking up. “I don’t have anything that can take out a slime that big.”

“We’ve got a problem here.”

The enemy was slow enough to give them the leisure to discuss strategy, but that leisure soon disappeared. The slime was beginning to pick up its pace.

Is it getting irritated? Loren wondered.

No, slimes didn’t have such emotions—right? But how to explain this sudden increase in speed? Either way, the slime approached, regardless of his thoughts on the matter.

Startled by its new speed, Parmè tripped, falling on top of Cloud, whom she had been dragging. The slime wasn't going to miss this opportunity. It spread its body to take her in—

Loren chuckled Al aside, grabbed Parmè by the hand, and yanked her out of the way.

“Eek!” Parmè let out a scream far cuter than her high-handed attitude suggested as she flew into Loren's arms.

Cloud wasn't so lucky. The slime was on him in no time at all. Abandoned and out cold, he had no way to escape being swallowed whole.

Parmè gasped. “Ah...it's all my...”

“Don't think about it! This is an accident, totally out of your control! If you have time to space out, go help Ange.”

The slime wriggled like a worm as its body chewed and digested its prey. The air filled with the sound of crunching bone, and Parmè was on the verge of losing herself before Loren smacked her across the cheek and pushed her toward Ange.

Flustered as she was, Parmè headed over to help Ange carry her burden.

Loren sighed. “Why don't we just feed them all to the slime and run while it's occupied?”

“You have my vote,” said Lapis as she casually kicked Al's body aside.

At that, Phem, still conscious, flailed in Ange's hands, and it took both Ange and Parmè to hold her down.

“No, for argument's sake, we'll need someone to turn in when we explain everything to the school.”

“Wouldn't one of them be enough?”

“Cloud and Ein were just being manipulated, and we've already lost Cloud.”

“But what if we peg Phem as the accomplice and abandon him?”

Loren pointed at Al. Claes had no rebuttal. While the revival of the dark god had come down to coincidence and bad timing, it was hard to feel merciful

toward the boy on an emotional level, as he had at least tried to instigate it.

A part of Loren didn't *not* want to feed the kid to the slimes, and Claes did ultimately hold his tongue.

"I'm all for abandoning them!" Ange cast her vote while barely managing to haul Phem's writhing body with Parmè's assistance. Her response seemed to stem from all the unnecessary trouble the girl was giving her, rather than from moral standing. She wanted to abandon her package and choose the method that would best ensure her own survival. "Let's just toss them already! We can have this girl testify, and that will be enough."

"I-I, ah... Yes, I intend to give a proper testimony." Parmè seemed confused when the conversation suddenly shifted toward her, but she accepted the burden placed on her shoulders.

Ange looked to Claes, hoping that would be enough to convince him, while Claes, in turn, looked at Loren, his eyes making clear that though he wanted to do something, he couldn't.

"Then if worse comes to worst, I suppose we can—"

In the moment before Loren made this final drastic call, Lapis shouted a warning. "Mr. Loren!"

Having fully absorbed its swallowed prey, the slime suddenly stopped undulating and lunged toward them, several times faster than it had been before. Having had its first taste of flesh, it seemed the slime was eager to seek out more. It hungered, it wanted. This was no ordinary slime.

But as Loren was the closest, he was too late to react.

"Dammit!" Loren cursed, readying his sword as a shield—but he found himself swallowed while in that posture. The slime instantly enveloped him up to the shoulders.

Pushing against the ground with his sword, Loren struggled to free himself.

"Mr. Loren!"

"Forget about me! Now's your chance! Slip past it!"

The black liquid in which he was enveloped was too viscous, and slowly,

inexorably, it drained the freedom from his body. Even so, he struggled, ordering the others to flee while it was occupied.

“But...!”

“Just go! I can handle this on my—”

The slime covered his head before he could finish. Loren had just barely managed to take one final deep breath, but if he didn’t do something about the slime before he ran out of air, he would end up just like Cloud. He gripped his sword and began swinging it around, not stopping to think.

As long as he could crush its core, the slime would die. The problem was that the slime’s body was pitch-black, and he couldn’t see where the core *was*. But within its clinging, thickened body, his limbs wouldn’t move like he told them to, and even if he did manage to hit the core, he couldn’t be certain that he had the momentum to crush it. Nevertheless, rather than fretting over whether he could manage it, it was far more important to keep moving. Loren swung his arms relentlessly, frantic and determined.

<Mister, please! Let me help.>

Loren shook his head at Scena’s cry. *Lapis will find out!* he screamed in his head.

<But if I don’t help now, you’ll die. If she finds out, she finds out, and we can deal with that then!>

The slime’s stranglehold on his body grew tighter by the second, and as Loren’s lungs ran dry, his movements dulled. If he did nothing, then soon he would be unable to move a finger. He would either be asphyxiated or crushed to death.

Fine! I’m counting on you!

<Here we go! Energy drain, full throttle!>

Scena unleashed her powers, no restraint. The force she exerted should have instantly killed something as simple as a slime. Yet as was to be expected from a being summoned by a dark god, even when faced with the fearsome strength of a *Lifeless King*, the slime’s grip on Loren’s body didn’t weaken in the slightest.

However, at the same time, the vitality she drained from it poured into Loren's body. He was still out of breath—already half-suffocated—but the stolen vitality turned into his strength, and soon he was swinging his sword again.

Don't underestimate me! I'm not going to be taken out by a mere slime!

Just like that, something clicked into place in a far corner of his mind.

Despite the lack of oxygen, Loren churned through the slime's insides faster than before. With Scena supplying the power, his blade gradually grew faster and faster, until each blow was ripping off parts of the slime, sending them splashing into their surroundings—then finally, most likely by coincidence, one slash managed to connect with the slime's ever-shifting core.

Loren sensed the point of contact through his sword, and he poured every last ounce of his strength into the blow. He wasn't going to let this chance slip by. His blade dug forward—making a crack. He shoved it farther and farther in until finally, he severed the core in two. His blade slammed into the floor with all its stored-up momentum.

The slime could no longer maintain itself. It lost the strength to keep Loren at bay, dissipating into lifeless fluid, its jet-black body spraying over the ground.

At last, Loren managed to fill his lungs with oxygen once more. He took in a large breath, fell to his knees, and splashed facedown into the dark fluids at his feet.

Epilogue:

Awakening to Anxiety

“I REALLY THINK we ought to do something about that condition of yours. You seem to end up in the hospital every single time.”

That was how Lapis started the conversation as she used a small knife to peel a fruit by Loren’s bedside.

I’m not getting hospitalized by choice, Loren grumbled.

They were once again in a hospital in Kaffa—the one with which Loren had grown far too acquainted since he started his adventuring life. He wouldn’t have been surprised had he opened his eyes to Monte Lugar, where the training academy was located. He was actually rather shocked to find himself back here.

“I left Mr. Claes and Ms. Ange behind. They had to report the facts.”

The transfer gate on the tenth floor of the Wolfe labyrinth was meant to send its users to a certain room in the academy. However, Lapis explained that she had changed the destination by fiddling with the settings. Saying she urgently needed to get Loren to a hospital, she drove Claes, Ange, and all the surviving students into the gate at its default setting, then modified it to send herself and Loren straight to Kaffa.

“You were in a pretty bad state, Mr. Loren. You were covered in slime, unconscious, and your hands were shaking. You were almost like a newborn fawn.”

“How did you explain away your ability to tamper with a transfer gate?”

“I am a priest of the god of knowledge.”

Another day, another bar raise, but Loren opted not to worry about it. He couldn’t, as soon as he imagined himself in the state Lapis described to him. It couldn’t have been pretty. He hardly wanted to see a man covered in goop, even if that man was himself.

“How’s my condition?” Loren expected he had been on the verge of death,

just like every other time he had been carted to the hospital. *Can't see why this time would be any different.*

Lapis shook her head. She even looked a bit sullen. “Strangely, it wasn’t that bad this time.” She placed the peeled fruit on a plate atop a nearby stand, slowly wiping the juices from her hands before picking up a sheet of paper by the plate. “Your wounds total up to a dislocated shoulder and a few damaged tendons. A handful of torn muscles, and a bit of internal bleeding here and there, but that’s about it.”

Loren was already aware of all the wounds she listed off. But usually, when that something *clicked* in his head, he ended up draining his body of even its last reserves. This time, the energy Scena had snatched up from the black slime had presumably been enough to compensate for the drain.

He had still been paid in kind for his efforts—the power he received had been too much for his body to bear, and every time he’d swung his sword, he had overexerted his arms. This damage was largely the consequence of his own actions.

“It will only take a few days for a full recovery.”

“Ain’t that a bit fast?” He had expected at least twice that.

Lapis turned her body away and proclaimed, “You have a master of blessings right next to you.”

“Ah, sorry about that. And thanks.”

“On the contrary, you suffered such grievous wounds that it will take a few days, *even with* a priest as excellent as myself. Do you understand how serious your predicament is?”

Lapis glared at him hard, and he meekly nodded back.

In truth, he’d gotten off far lighter than expected, but he understood that didn’t mean that the wounds were *objectively* light. He didn’t have full control of his body yet, and as he was, he didn’t have the willpower to oppose Lapis.

“So how long was I out?”

“Three whole days. Mr. Claes and his girls have already returned since giving

their report.” For these details, she picked up a separate piece of paper. “First, the ringleader, Mr. Al. He was expelled, shipped back to his parents, and will probably be sent straight to take his vows. I doubt they’ll let him see the light of day for the rest of his years.”

In noble society, sending someone “to take their vows” was shorthand for ridding a house of the sorts they couldn’t let out into the world, she explained. Whether they really were sent to a holy institution—or to somewhere much darker—was unclear to those outside the upper echelons. However, those who received this sentence were rarely ever seen again.

“Ms. Phem is being treated as if she dropped out of her own accord. She was essentially expelled. Her whereabouts are currently unknown. Since she’s not a noble, she won’t be sent to take any vows, and she might actually become a formidable adventurer.”

There were no qualifications required to become an adventurer. Phem was light on her feet, and it wouldn’t be strange for her to end up one, despite everything. However, Loren refused to imagine what would happen should that occur, nor did he want to meet her again.

“Mr. Cloud...is being treated as if he died during the exam. His remains were... well, he was swallowed by a slime, and his body was caught up in your rampage, so...what was left of him was collected and buried. Mr. Ein’s exam was suspended, and it is up to him what he does from now on.”

Al aside, Ein had gotten along well with his other two comrades. One had betrayed him for money, while the other had been killed by a slime. Loren didn’t know if the boy would be able to endure the grief. Ein was presumably in a state of shock; his recovery would be up to him, and this wasn’t a matter that someone who was at best an acquaintance could do anything about. Loren offered him a prayer.

“Ms. Parmè failed the exam and will have to retake it. Her party was annihilated—that one can be chalked up to bad luck. There isn’t much else to say.”

“What about her party members?”

“One is dead. We saw her ourselves. Recovering the body...would be

impossible, given its last known state. The other two are missing. The school has sent out a search party, but knowing the situation down there, their chances of survival are despair-inducingly low.”

It seemed that besides Cloud, three students—whose names he didn’t know—had also died a tragic death in the labyrinth. This apparently wasn’t entirely rare for the school. Through a bout of bad luck, the students had been wrapped up in a mass slime outbreak due to the revival of some dark god—but far too many adventurers lost their lives to bad luck, as it were. This wasn’t rare either.

“Ms. Parmè left a message with Mr. Claes. She said she will definitely repay the favor she owes you, and that, if you were ever to pass by her estate, to please stop by. Good for you, Mr. Loren. You’ve received an invitation from quite the lovely lass,” Lapis joked, seemingly to conceal the darkness in her eyes.

“I can’t say I care for blonde ringlets,” Loren muttered.

“Oh, really? A shame for her, then. Incidentally, what are your thoughts on black ponytails?” Lapis pointed at her own hair.

Loren’s mouth curved into a sharp frown, and he maintained his silence. He could tell things would instantly get strange if he responded in the affirmative. Though if he said he didn’t, the mood would turn perilous instead.

There was no right answer to the question.

“No response? That’s a little discouraging,” Lapis said, though she didn’t seem discouraged in the least.

Loren knew it was time to change the topic. “What about the quest?”

Their job had been to proctor the exam. Surely they hadn’t done poorly enough for that to be treated as a failure—although Loren wasn’t sure if he would call the quest a success either. The exam had been a mess. That said, the fact that Al had been after one of Wolfe’s treasures had nothing to do with their responsibility as proctors.

“The quest is being treated as a success. The headmaster swore that he would see to it—at least, that’s what I heard from Mr. Claes.”

Lapis placed the paper back on the table. Next, she picked up the plate and cleanly split the fruit into six segments. She took one and placed it in her mouth before offering the rest to Loren. Each bite she took was crisp and clean.

“I would have protested if they treated it as a failure after everything we did,” Lapis said after swallowing. “Hardly any of that was our fault.”

Loren stared absentmindedly at the fruit placed before him, and he posed another question. “What about the dark god?”

“The matter has been reported to the headmaster as well as to the adventurers’ guild. They interviewed me and everything.”

There were no documents or legends pertaining to the “god of sloth.” Even the headmaster, Wolfe’s direct descendant, hadn’t heard anything about it from his forebears. The box that Downer Acedia had been sealed in was briefly mentioned in the master list of artifacts, but no one had known what it was used for. Its only description was *purpose unknown*, and it had been stored rather haphazardly.

“There’s no use in us thinking about it. We haven’t the slightest idea where he went, after all. It won’t be so easy to track down someone called a dark god.”

“Was he...a demon?”

The dark god’s eyes had been purple. Demon-kind were the only race in the world who possessed eyes of such color.

“I don’t know,” was all Lapis said to that. “He had the traits of my kind, but he was sealed hundreds of years ago. It’s hard to identify him as a demon solely based on those eyes. I might be able to root out some more detailed accounts if I return home...”

What sort of place is your house? Loren thought to ask, but he contained himself. He still had another question. “What about your arm?”

“Are you talking about this?”

Lapis waved her left arm at him. Appearance-wise, it looked no different from what she’d sported before, but Lapis seemed satisfied as she looked at it. “I finally have a real arm—now if only I had the other one too.”

“Congratulations, I guess.”

“Thank you. At this rate, I should be all flesh in no time.”

Her satisfied smile suddenly became serious. Loren was taken aback by the abrupt shift, especially after she placed her arms on the bed, leaning her face closer to him. “On another note, Mr. Loren. Is there something you’d like to say to me?”

Loren felt his mouth unconsciously slacken as she stared at him up close. It took all his willpower to maintain his calm and keep his mouth tightly sealed.

He did have a vague idea of what she was referring to. In order to enable Loren to escape the slime, Scena had made full use of her *Lifeless King* powers. There was no way Lapis hadn’t noticed, though Loren desperately wanted to postpone that discussion—even if for just a little longer.

But Lapis’s expression was a little too intent for him to get out of this without incident. As his mind raced as fast as it could, Loren finally reached the words that could set him free. “I’m sorry you have to carry me to the hospital every time, Lapis. I really am grateful.”

Lapis seemed entirely surprised by this expression of sincere gratitude. Once she recovered, she puffed up her slightly flushed cheeks.

“Was that not it?” Loren asked, feigning obliviousness—though he knew it was nowhere close.

Lapis let out a long sigh, brushed her hair aside, and backed off. “No. I will accept that answer for now.”

So she’s going to wait until I’m ready to talk. Loren nodded. “Thanks for that.”

While Lapis no doubt knew, she would act like she didn’t so long as he didn’t spell it out. He once again thanked her for her consideration and slowly closed his eyes.

It would take a few days before he was fully recovered, and either because his stamina had yet to return or because he had talked a little too long, he could feel the drowsiness that came with fatigue.

“Please take it easy,” Lapis said. “We’ll look for another quest once you’re

back on your feet.”

He heard Lapis stand. She had evidently sensed that he was about to sleep and decided it was best if she left him to it.

“Ah, I’ll subtract the hospitalization fees as well as those for my blessings from your quest payment.”

“There’s not gonna be a single copper left after that.”

Loren got the feeling Lapis’s treatment fees would be far higher than those the hospital charged and sighed. He heard Lapis giggling.

“Let’s hope the next job is a little more profitable. Good night,” she said, and at last, she left. Her presence vanished from the room.

With his eyes closed, a hazy anxiety seeped into Loren’s head. *Is a job like that ever going to come my way?*

But it wasn’t long before the hands of sleep had whisked him away to his dreams.

Bonus Story:

From the Notes of a Certain Priest

HELLO, I'M LAPIS. Just your average, everyday demon.

You might say that introducing myself as a demon contradicts my claim to be average, and in fact, a lot of people (humans, that is) think so. But get a large enough group of any people together, and it makes sense that most of them would be average, no?

Putting all that philosophizing aside, you may be wondering why a normal, healthy little demon girl is writing this meaningless spiel. Well, it all started one morning when my parents suddenly kicked me out of the house, saying I needed to go see the wider world.

It has just occurred to me that there's something I need to do apart from expanding my knowledge base. Yes, certain events led up to my expulsion from my home, and I think that is probably my most pressing issue.

To tell you the truth, my arms, legs, and eyes are all elaborate imitations. One of the reasons I ventured out into the world was to reclaim the real ones, but this and that happened, and I'd ultimately forgotten all about it. When I think back on it now, a part of me wonders if it doesn't really matter... Their absence doesn't really impede my daily functions, so I can hardly be blamed for forgetting about them.

But, well, now that I think about it, I get the feeling that I have a vague sense of where those pieces of me are. They were replaced with fakes, but they were taken in such a way that they could be easily reattached. They weren't *completely* removed, in short, and there's nothing strange in me knowing where a part of me is.

I have decided to consult Mr. Loren on the matter.

Before bringing this discussion to Loren, I needed to see if there were any quests at the guild that might bring us to one of the locations where I needed to go. Rather than telling him I wanted to go somewhere specifically for my own benefit, I concluded that it would be far more reasonable to make the search a detour on a larger quest.

Luckily, I found a convenient assignment. I brought it over, asked him to come with me, and received his hearty consent. Which is to say, we are going to go to an adventurer training academy together. Our objective awaits us in the labyrinth beneath the school.

Now, while our official objective involves observing potential graduates and walking around the labyrinth with them, that is merely a front, and one in which I have barely any interest. I fully intend to finish this swiftly so that I can get to my real goal. I pray the job ends without a hitch.

Labyrinths come in all shapes and sizes. Some are fully artificial, while others spring up in nature. Even the natural variety range from those that really did sprout up by complete coincidence to those formed by magic, or even those that are the work of certain creatures. In any case, there are all sorts.

The one beneath the academy would have to be somewhere between artificial and natural. I don't have much experience with labyrinths, so it did draw my interest ever so slightly. But there was a problem.

This school is apparently the same one that Mr. Claes attended. We heard it from the horse's mouth on the way here. My evaluation of Mr. Claes is practically in the negatives, numerically speaking, and the simple fact that this was his school has rather ruined it for me. However, it does seem that Mr. Claes has shed a bit of his arrogance, and he's thus far managed to act with more modesty. To my shock and surprise.

I suspect the cause lies with Mr. Loren—who cut him down to size the last time we worked together, then saved Mr. Claes's loved ones. How lovely to see the boy take the less trodden path of actually using the opportunities given to him to better himself.

In short, Mr. Claes holds many gifts and is blessed with more fortune. Though

I get the feeling he would be better off getting stabbed in some back alley rather than reforming—for the sake of all the world's women, you see.

Ah, of course, I don't mean that I want Mr. Loren to stab him. Even if he is the enemy of all women, Mr. Claes has the backing of a substantially powerful organization, and even without that, I wouldn't want to make a criminal of Mr. Loren.

I was pondering these matters as we met the headmaster—an enormous man who I couldn't believe was a member of humankind. We received information on the students who were scheduled to graduate, and as luck would have it, a group that Loren had saved at a bar was among them.

Loren chose them, presumably thinking it was fate or something like it. For my part, I feel it doesn't matter who we work with, but I got the feeling it would be a bit easier if we could skip the introductions.

If I must say *something*, though, not only do these children lack even a modicum of practical vigilance, they are appallingly behaved. Should I leave them in a corner of the labyrinth? Oh, no, I won't. I won't, but why do so many kids out there have to make me feel so inclined to do such things?

We entered the labyrinth with the children. To my surprise, one of the students tried to put the moves on Mr. Loren. I apologize for contradicting my previous remarks, but I really did feel like ensuring she never leaves these tunnels.

I held the feeling down.

The situation was clearly wrong from the moment we entered. Whatever monsters appeared were weakened beyond recognition. I could only imagine some process has malfunctioned within the labyrinth; the whole place reeked of trouble.

How about you try returning alive instead of focusing on your graduation, people? I found myself thinking.

Unfortunately, on top of the monsters we ran into being weak, we hardly ran into any monsters at all. The winds of good fortune carried these students so very easily to their goal.

Even if they clear this trial and become adventurers, I don't expect them to live long, and I don't think I'm alone there. The students we're supervising refused to be satisfied with reaching their goal of the end of the fifth floor—they declared that they would make it all the way to the bottom.

This was convenient to me, and I felt I didn't have to inform them that they were biting off more than they could chew, or that they would be their own ruin. However their end would have nothing to do with me. I was merely delighted that I would be able to make it to my goal at the bottom without any tomfoolery—when we suddenly faced an outbreak of slimes.

Alone, a slime is a lump of mucus without intellect. Once found, they can be dealt with by crushing their core or burning them. Unfortunately, they are a dire threat in large numbers, especially in enclosed spaces.

Faced with too many slimes for even Mr. Loren to slash away, our only option was to run, and we were forced to sprint every which way across the labyrinth. To add more problems to the mix, my arms and legs acted up, and I yet again had to trouble Mr. Loren with the burden of my body.

I'm sure this mass outbreak is somehow related to my failing limbs. Numerous phenomena can produce a slime, but they most naturally emerge in places with strong mana disruption. So many slimes means a considerable mana disturbance, and that is probably what is impeding my limbs, which require mana to operate.

Not that realizing this is any consolation.

About those slimes. I didn't know why but they quit chasing us and disappeared somewhere. I figured they'd found some other prey. I felt lucky—I did—but a strange presence lurking in the shadows kept me wary.

During our flight, we met up with Mr. Claes, who had been proctoring a different set of students, and together we headed to the bottom floor with a

student who had been nearly swallowed. The golem in front of the door had somehow been deactivated, and I knew then that something terrible was about to happen.

I nevertheless managed to find that piece of me—my left arm, by the way—on the final floor easily enough. I wondered whether that meant a little of my original power would return to me. The more power I had, the higher the chance of my identity being revealed, so I knew I would need to act more covertly.

Once I no longer have to work to contain myself, I will finally be first-rate.

In any case, I hoped that would be the end of the matter, but for some reason, the students we proctored suddenly raised the flag of rebellion. One of them declared that he would revive a dark god and become its priest. We managed to take out those arrogant little bigmouths remarkably painlessly, but to my surprise, a dark god really did revive.

That was a first, even for me. Luckily for us, the god who woke up described himself as the god of sloth. Mr. Downer Acedia stated that fighting was a pain and chose to run away instead, though he left us a massive slime as a parting gift.

It would have been surpassingly easy to burn it away, but given our location, that wasn't the best option. A student was swallowed up as we were dithering, and of all things, Mr. Loren was swallowed as well. Everyone else aside, I couldn't just overlook Mr. Loren becoming slime feed.

No matter what sort of damages I accrued, I very well intended to burn that slime to the ground if Mr. Loren hadn't stopped me. I was confident he could have dealt with freeing himself from a single mid-sized slime, but I knew being swallowed by such a large one meant it would take more than physical strength to break free.

I was sure it would be impossible even for Mr. Loren, and yet...

Just how much strength does he have to be able to swing around his sword while so constricted? What's more, his swings whittled the slime down, and I know I'm not one to say this, but he hardly seemed human.

He cut and cleaved until he had destroyed the slime's core. I didn't think he had transcended his humanity, but there was definitely something wrong with his body. Once he had run out of strength and collapsed, I was consumed by an impulse to examine every inch of him. However, I knew I needed to carry him to a hospital as soon as I could, so I held in my curiosity and escaped.

And that was the end to that job.

I think I'll end things at that.

Mr. Loren really needs to do something about how he keeps ending up hospitalized after every job, but here I am, thinking a quest isn't truly over until I have him on a sickbed. I think it's all right to leave him as he is, at least as long as his life isn't in danger.

For now, I'll put down my pen until our next adventure.

Afterword

TO ALL NEWCOMERS, it's a pleasure to meet you. To you old-timers, long time no see. My name is Mine, and this is my third time greeting you like this.

Your honored patronage and the reception of my work has allowed me to deliver Volume Three without incident. Was I able to kill a bit of time for you? If so, that's all I can ask for as a writer. But now what do I say?

I've heard I'm not supposed to vent about my current issues in the afterword. If I had anything I wanted to force in, it would have to be that this is the *third volume*. The third volume is a great milestone for a writer; whether a series can continue or not is largely up to Volume Three, and so I tremble as I write this afterword.

I think I'm doing my best, and I just want the readers to kick back and read however they want.

As for announcements. First, another series I've written, called *New Life+*, is releasing its third manga volume. Oddly enough, it's the third volume as well, and the web version has gotten a decent reception on NicoNico and ComicWalker.

I have already written over sixteen volumes of the novel version of that story, and if everything goes as planned, I should be releasing the seventeenth volume next month. That's quite a number, isn't it?

If you like this work, perhaps you could try that one out as well. However, while putting together *New Life+* and *Broke Mercenary*, I've already published eighteen volumes, and after eighteen afterwords, I'm running out of things to write.

Are there any readers here who have read all of them? If you're here, then please send little old Mine a message and tell him what sorts of things you'd like to read in the afterword. Mine will be very happy. I've already worked my brain over a bit just to write what you see here, and I'm glad you're reading it. I myself don't really remember reading afterwords.

We're nearing the end now.

To everyone in Hobby Japan's editing department. To the proofreaders, the marketing team, and the designers. To peroshi-sama, who keeps providing wonderful illustrations, and my editor, K-sama, who always spares time for my phone calls. Truly, thank you.

And my deepest thanks to you, the readers. I pray that your patronage may bring us together again.

—Mine



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